

## As Long As I Have You

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# **As Long As I Have You**

by [LyingMonsters](#)

## Summary

Feliciano Vargas, an artist in love with the avant-garde of West Berlin, meets the officer Ludwig Beilschmidt on the late train. When the Wall goes up- and he begins to fall for Ludwig- everything he thought he knew will be tried to its limits.

Inspired by the Elvis Presley song of the same name.

# Geborgenheit

## Chapter Summary

Art by the amazing Imcold.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*August 12th, 1961, West Berlin*

Feliciano wouldn't admit it, but he loved the trains that ran during the day. There were dozens of people just like him, with their own lives and dreams and hopes and fears, reading the paper or watching the city speed by past the window. He itched to read Lovino's letter tucked deep in his pocket again, but he shouldn't bring it out. He could imagine only too well the look Lovino would have given him if he were here. Looking around at the people crowded in the train car around him, he couldn't help but think-how many of them were in the same situation he was? How many had letters from loved ones pressed firmly over their hearts, paper crinkled from use?

If Feliciano could, he'd try to stay on the train forever, except the guards at all the stations already didn't like him. If he tried to paint on the train, they'd definitely ban him and it would be terrible. Not that he wanted to paint at the moment. It felt like there was a block between his hands and his mind's eye, his body betraying him, and it was frustrating. He hadn't sold anything in a few weeks.

And so Feliciano was on the late train-it was cheap enough for the people who made up the broken backbone of the city. The cars were populated by the poor, the workers hunched by years of physical labor. Their hands were always stained with grey dust and their shoulders slumped with a palpable loneliness. Feliciano couldn't stand the loneliness. West Berlin was bright and colourful and loud, but he didn't know people, and Lovino wasn't there. Lovino almost never came to visit him, and he told Feliciano to stay in the Western sector as much as possible.

Tonight, there was a man sitting across from him on the late train who couldn't be one of the construction workers. His olive green *Bundespolizei* uniform was pressed and clean, distinguishing him from the grey.

Feliciano was fascinated. The officer sharply differed from others of his rank. His gaze, though hawklike and alert, betrayed no ill intent. He sat straight, stoic, and silent, bored even, watching the city lights slip by through the window. Feliciano wanted to draw him, and this time, he thought that it might turn out well.

Though the train was nearly full, Feliciano risked slipping out of his seat to stand closer. The man looked up in surprise. His face was stern, but younger than Feliciano expected, and he had startling blue eyes. The whole image-this man in the grey train car, blue eyes bright but guarded, was just what he needed.

'Can I paint you?'

'Excuse me?' the man asked, voice deep and accented, his words clipped. He clearly hadn't grown up here with the sharper accent the streets afforded. Everything about him was controlled. His eyes landed on Feliciano's paint-stained hands.

'Please?' Feliciano tried to smile, but his glare was intimidating and his heart was beating faster. The man's brow furrowed.

'Why would you want to paint me?' he asked haltingly. Feliciano hesitated, thinking of how many people surrounded them, but the train car ignored them. Answers he couldn't say rested on the tip of his tongue-that he was fascinating in a way that was more than art, that his eyes were blue, and simply that he wanted to, more than he ever had.

'Because I'm an artist,' he said instead. The man's eyebrow raised.

'Do you normally do this?'

'Well-no, not really,' he admitted. His courage was fading. The man's eyes were piercing, like if he looked long enough he would find out everything about Feliciano, including things he himself hadn't figured out yet. 'I...I'll go, forget I asked anything.'

'No, wait.' He reached out suddenly and caught his sleeve, and Feliciano turned back around, barely daring to believe before he pulled away again, gloved hands bunching up the material of his uniform trousers. He opened his mouth, seemed to reconsider, and shut it. Their gazes met, and Feliciano felt his heart jump, shaky fledgling wings and legs pushing out of the egg that was his heart and making the whole world stumble. The officer took a deep breath and held out his hand to shake. 'I do not...mind if you paint me. It is for art, after all.'

'Really?' He couldn't help his smile. He wanted to shout and spin and jump, but he settled for shaking the officer's hand enthusiastically. 'Grazie, grazie! My name is Feliciano Vargas and I'm glad you're my model. What's your name?'

'Officer Ludwig Beilschmidt,' he said, making as if to offer his hand again, but Feliciano was already gripping it. He instead did a strange, jerky half-nod. Feliciano was struck with the feeling that Ludwig was out of his depth, and didn't quite know how to react. Despite this, he straightened, shoulders back, chin tilted up. 'I would be honoured to be your...model.'

Feliciano's half of the city may have been roaring with art, but sometimes it felt grey. Tonight, though, it was as if the world had been flooded with color, Ludwig the center of it all. He took hold of the rail, still and poised as if commanded, and his eyes were the exact blue of the sky in the countrysides of Italy. He touched Feliciano's wrist and it was like lightning through his veins, filling his chest with summer thunderstorms.

'Where is your stop, Feliciano?'

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They got off into the cool night air. Feliciano almost expected to wake up. Here he was, walking home with an officer as his model. Excitement sparked in stray lightning bolts beneath his skin.

'I think you'd look good as a portrait. You'd look good in anything.'

Ludwig's ears turned pink. 'Thank you.'

Feliciano only barely stopped himself from giggling at his expression. 'You know, I can teach you how to paint one day. You can teach me about what you do as an officer.'

Then he realized Ludwig had stopped, looking up towards the East.

'Ludwig?'

Ludwig blinked for a second and then deliberately turned his back on the East. 'I was distracted. My apologies, please go on.'

'Did you see something?' Feliciano's mind went first to soldiers, but Ludwig was standing beside him, strong and fearless, and so he didn't worry.

'No.' Ludwig paused to consider. 'I sincerely hope not. I would prefer that this night be uninterrupted.'

'My brother lives in the East,' Feliciano told him. A second later, he felt like he should regret saying so much, but talking was just too easy out here.

'Mine does as well,' Ludwig said, so softly Feliciano almost didn't hear. Before he could ask what he meant, blue eyes were pinning him in place again. 'Why does your brother live in the East?'

Feliciano floundered for a moment before ending up with the truth. 'Because he runs a bar there, and I like the art scene here. Why?'

'My brother... told me to move to the West,' Ludwig said. Feliciano wanted to ask more, but the clench of Ludwig's jaw told him the matter was closed. He looked sterner and forbidding, so different than the hints of the man who was underneath the uniform. Feliciano didn't want Ludwig to look like the rest of the officers when he'd been so bright and different when he'd first seen him.

'Tell me about being an officer,' he said, in an awkward bid to change the subject. 'Have you ever had to fight a criminal? Have you ever arrested someone?'

Ludwig's mouth quirked slightly. 'I am afraid it is not as exciting as you make it seem. No, I have not arrested or fought anyone yet.'

'If you did, I think you'd win.'

Ludwig very nearly smiled. 'Yes, I would.'

'Have you seen the Red Army much? Lovi said they always come and terrify him and-' Feliciano stopped dead. He wasn't supposed to mention his brother's name. He was doing something *secret and important*, according to his letters, and he needed to be called Romano. He peered up at his companion, hearing every shallow breath he took, palms suddenly sweaty. What would Ludwig think?

Ludwig hadn't seemed to notice.

'I haven't seen many soldiers. I was only assigned to the border recently.'

'What do you do there?' Feliciano asked cautiously, relieved nothing had happened. Ludwig shook his head.

'It would not interest you.' He coughed. 'Besides, I am off duty right now, and I am not supposed to talk about it.'

Feliciano supposed that was reasonable. 'You know, I've never properly talked to an officer before. Usually they just yell at me. You're off duty, though, so you can't yell at me, right?'

Ludwig looked bemused again. 'I am not going to yell at you, I promise.'

'Good, because you look really intimidating and that isn't a bad thing, Ludwig, it's probably just because of your-' His gaze fell on Ludwig's broad shoulders and the tension in the uniform fabric where his muscles strained against it, and the large, slightly calloused hand that was brushing very close to his. He swallowed. There seemed to be something stuck in his throat. His face felt hot. 'Your uniform.'

'Really?' Ludwig's mouth did that strange quirk again, and Feliciano realized he was almost laughing. His face didn't feel any less warm. 'Would I look less intimidating out of it, Feliciano?'

Ludwig's deep accent curled around his name like a promise and Feliciano choked on his next breath, struggling to think of what to say. Even Ludwig looked surprised at himself. He looked away, ears red.

'I apologize.'

'I'll have to find out,' Feliciano blurted, and tried to save face by adding, '-unless I end up painting you in uniform.'

Ludwig was watching him carefully again, body tense, eyes piercing, but that tiny motion still flickered around his lips. 'Which would you prefer?'

Feliciano felt lightheaded. Ludwig had the slightest hint of a real smile, and the moonlight played off his hair and the planes of his face. Feliciano wanted to reach forward and touch him, feel the strength under his stiff uniform, but he didn't. He couldn't.

'I haven't decided yet,' he said.

They walked the rest of the way back to Feliciano's flat in a charged, almost giddy silence. Their hands brushed occasionally and Feliciano felt acutely aware of the cool night air and the faraway sounds of cars and the train. When they finally arrived, Ludwig hesitated at the door, hand hovering over the door frame, but finally nodded to himself and stepped forward.

'It's not much,' Feliciano said, suddenly conscious of the small quarters.

'I wouldn't worry about it.' Ludwig was gazing at a painting on the wall. 'Did you do all of this?'

'Not *all* of it. But that-' Feliciano stopped. He hadn't looked at that painting in weeks. He should try to sell it, but he could never bring himself to. 'Oh. That's of my brother.'

He'd painted it right before Lovino had taken up the bar and they'd gone their separate ways. The man in the painting seemed too many years younger without the weight on his shoulders that Lovino always had now.

'You look very alike.'

'I got a picture of him smiling for it,' Feliciano said softly. It had been so long since he'd seen Lovino smile. He shook the thoughts away and pulled on Ludwig's arm. 'Here, come over and sit down.'

Ludwig did, awkwardly arranging himself on the chair. Feliciano almost had to laugh. He leaned in to help, easing him into a position that looked more comfortable and fixing the folds of his uniform. After a moment, he ended up at Ludwig's collar, and without thinking, tugged at his severe tie to loosen it, revealing the pale skin in the hollow of his neck. Ludwig's pulse was fluttering against his fingertips. Feliciano glanced up and found his startled blue eyes, and gloved hands loosely curled around his wrists.

'Feliciano,' Ludwig said unsteadily. His eyelashes were longer than he had expected, and caught the faint light. When Feliciano made to step back, the grip on his wrists lingered for a second more before releasing.

'Is that good?' Feliciano asked quietly, unsure himself what he meant. Ludwig pulled his collar straight. It was slightly crooked-not enough for anyone else to tell, but for him. He left his tie looser.

'Good,' he said, voice only barely catching on the word. Feliciano's whole body was humming with energy, leaping between the space between them. What would happen if they touched again, this time skin on skin?

Feliciano tried to push the thought away, but it lingered dangerously and so he turned to his easel. It was no good, because Ludwig was sitting there in the soft gold of the lamplight, looking so heart-achingly beautiful his whole body hummed. The only good thing was that it was easier than anything to paint him, even though he didn't know how to capture the fireworks that went off when Ludwig looked at him, or the questioning hint of his smile.

Feliciano leaned over, put on the radio, and lost himself in the painting. The music crackling from the old speakers was tinny, but the tune was familiar.

*Every kiss brings a thrill, and I know that it will, as long as I have you...*

There was nothing here except the soft music and the paint and the undefinable *something* between Feliciano and this officer. There was nothing to do except try to capture this beauty until the tension became too much.

Feliciano put down his brush. He couldn't concentrate. The weight of those blue eyes on him was making him reckless. If Ludwig didn't stop *looking* at him like he could see the galaxies written on his skin, Feliciano was going to do something like walk over and tell him exactly how beautiful he looked.

'We're done for today. If you're willing to come back tomorrow, I can finish it.' He glanced up, heart in his throat. He could finish the painting from memory, because the way Ludwig looked and talked and smiled was pressed into his soft heart, but he wanted to see him again. 'Will you?'

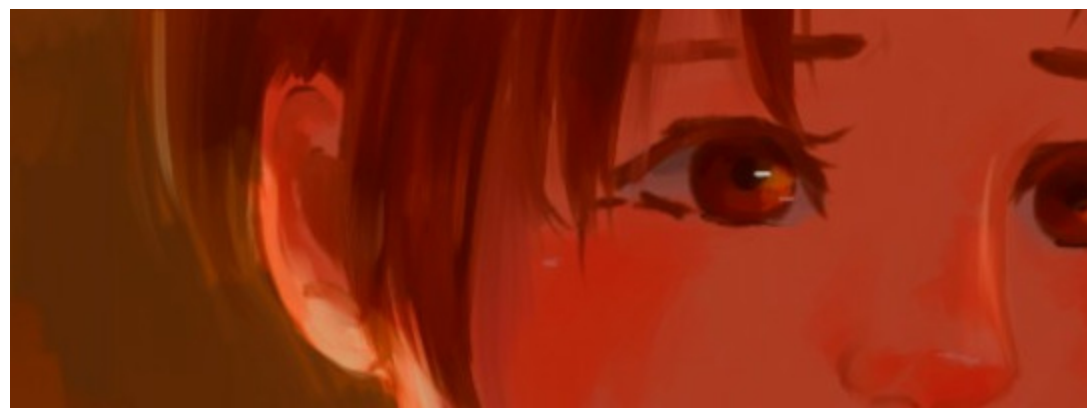
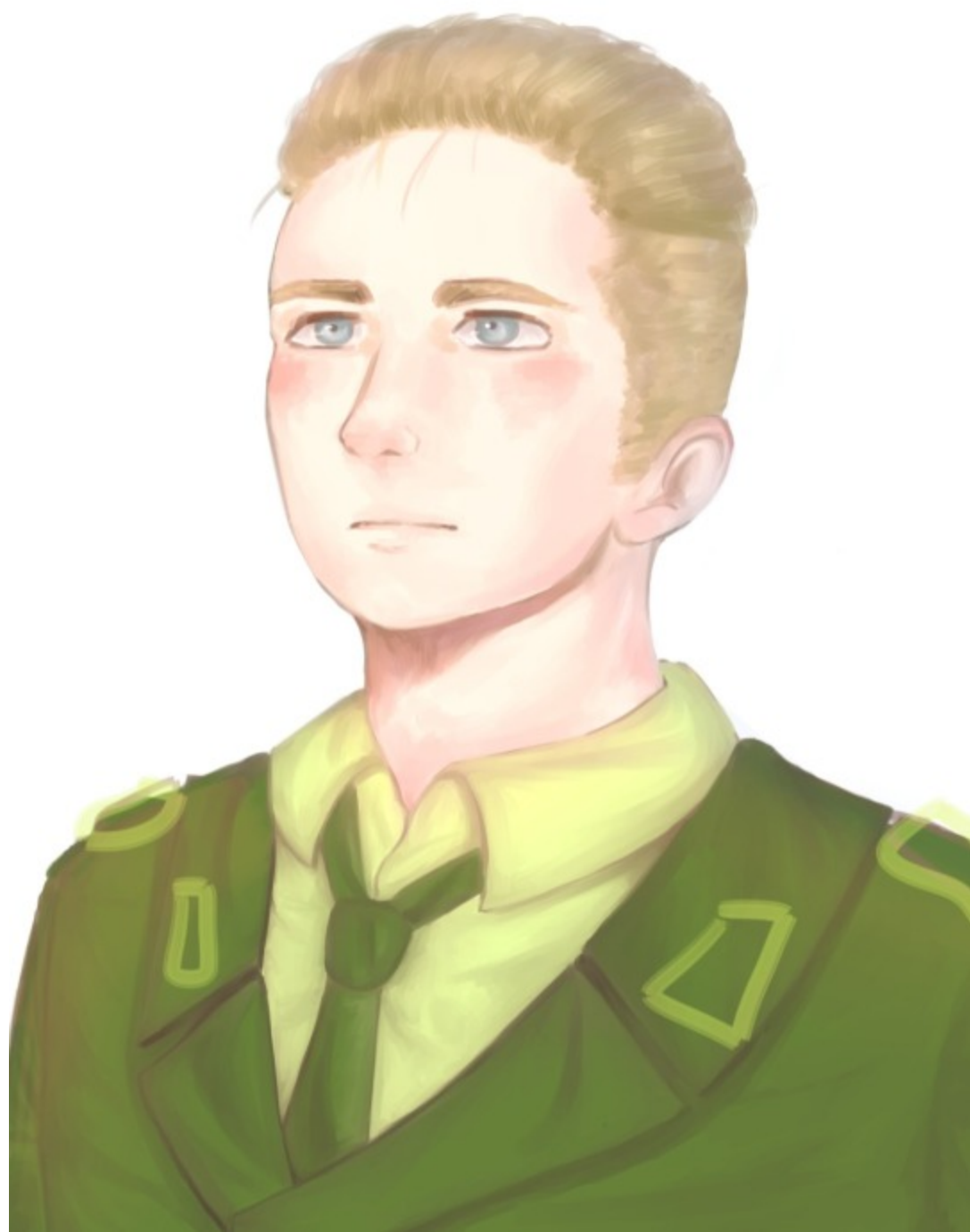
Now, Ludwig didn't look able to hold his gaze, eyes flicking from the painting to his hands and back, but when Feliciano finally caught him, there was a strange vulnerability in the blue that hadn't been there before.

'If you wish,' he said, sounding slightly breathless. Feliciano was walking forward before he realized, standing there in the amber light. *Waiting*. Their hands brushed, brushed again, and then twisted together in a rough squeeze, leather seams pressing against his thumb. Feliciano couldn't tell which one of them had first held on and didn't care, because his pulse was thrumming in the tips of his fingers so loudly he was sure Ludwig could feel it. The world stretched out the the span of their breaths.

Ludwig suddenly let go, his collar crooked again. His carefully slicked back hair was starting to come undone. He *glowed* in the soft darkness, and Feliciano wanted to touch him, slide his hands up in his blond hair and lean in to feel the press of muscle back. To ask him to *stay*.

He didn't. He couldn't. So Feliciano let Ludwig go, lingering at his door for a moment longer with an unreadable expression before disappearing.







## Chapter End Notes

Let's think of the future

Forget the past

You're not my first love

But you're my last

-As Long As I Have You

:: Copper gone green with age

## Chapter Two

Feliciano woke up to the grey light through the window, groggy and disoriented. He had a faint sensation of his dream, with blue eyes and strong shoulders. He had imagined what Ludwig would look like in broad daylight, but the details had slipped away like sand through his fingers, leaving only a warm memory.

He brushed it away for now and sat up, trying to see what had woken him. The pane of his window was cold and streaked with morning dew, and Feliciano wiped it away, still blinking the sleep from his eyes. The streets were empty like they almost never were, even in the hot, lazy afternoons when heat stretched time thin, and all was quiet. Once more, construction chattered in the distance. Nothing important. His thoughts still sluggish, Feliciano slipped back into his warm bed.

Two hours later, when his alarm rang, he'd forgotten about waking up earlier. The streets were empty as he stepped out, with his thin coat tucked around him to ward off the slight chill. Feliciano couldn't tell what it was that was wrong. Perhaps it was a holiday he'd forgotten about. He would like to have a holiday, because he could go visit Lovino and tell him about Ludwig. He hadn't seen his brother for weeks.

Smiling, he picked up his pace. His shoes against the pavement and a far-off rumble of construction were the only sound around. He would pass through the square on his way to the gallery and ask if it was a holiday. Maybe Ludwig would be stationed there, and they could celebrate whatever holiday it was together. And then he could finish his painting.

The rumble grew louder as he neared the square, and what Feliciano had mistaken for construction was instead the seething voices of people. Icy fear flooded down his back. Was this what Ludwig had been thinking of last night? The voices of dangerous people? Because they were dangerous. The people sounded angry, and scared, and Feliciano knew how scared people acted. Scared people could riot, and if Ludwig was there, he could get hurt. Feliciano's own fear was metallic in his teeth as he shoved his paints in his pockets and started running.

He burst out into the square, packed with a hot crush of bodies. The shouts and screams all blended into a roar of discordant noise in his head. He tried to push through the crowd, but people pushed back, and he couldn't see Ludwig anywhere. What if there was a riot, and that was the spark that set this city ablaze? Feliciano never wanted to see the horrors he had heard described by those who had been in wars.

His own panic seemed like it was fueling the crowd. In a final, desperate effort, he shoved forwards and fell forward into cold, open air. A barbed wire fence split the square in half. There was no line drawn in the cracked concrete with paint to tell people to stay back, but they kept away. They made a taut line across the square, rumbling with dissent, but they kept back because the guards had *guns*.

Feliciano stood in front of the line, trying to breathe the too-thin air. One of the guards on the other side of the barbed wire turned to him, and the click of his gun echoed through the

silence that had suffocated every thought. The barrel was scratched, catching light against the polished metal. He was barking something, an order, but he couldn't understand him. The barbed wire, and the rage of the people, and the guards with their tattered uniforms and deadly weapons didn't make any sense. The guard lifted his gun, and Feliciano stared down the endlessly black barrel.

*'Feliciano!'*

Strong arms wrapped around him, pulling him back into the safe mass of the crowd. Sound rushed back in, and sight, and Feliciano blinked through the bright sunlight up at Ludwig, still in his uniform. His blue eyes were wide and bright with emotion again. The crowd shifted back from them.

'Ludwig?' he whispered faintly. His tongue felt thick and dry. His gloved hand was still loosely wrapped around his wrist, and the reality of what had just happened-the terrifying depth of the gun barrel pointed at him-crashed in on him suddenly. 'Oh, God, you saved me, he was about to shoot me.' He pressed his free hand to his hammering heart, still in disbelief that there was no blood, no hurt.

'Why did you get so close?' Ludwig asked. He reached up as if to brush Feliciano's sweat-slicked hair away, but thought better of it at the last second and dropped his hand to step away. The crowd made room for him. Everyone shied away as if Ludwig was a weapon of his own right. Feliciano knew how they felt.

'I don't know,' Feliciano said. He was shaking from cold and fear, and wrapped his arms around himself. 'What happened? What is that barbed wire for?' He wanted Ludwig to reassure him it was just a mistake, a momentary disagreement between American and Soviet soldiers, but he knew that was not true.

'It is for the Wall,' Ludwig said. His eyes fluttered, and he looked off-balance. 'The Berlin Wall.'

The way he said it held weight. This was no mistake, no temporary worry. Ludwig shook himself slightly and focused again.

'Feliciano, I want you to come with me,' he said. He forced his stiff legs to keep up as Ludwig easily pushed through the crowd. People were staring.

'Where are you going?' Feliciano asked, stumbling on the crooked cobblestones. The construction he'd heard this morning came back to him. Had the Wall just been put up? 'Ludwig, I can't, I need to find my brother and find out if he's okay.'

'You can't. I will explain later, Feliciano, just follow me.' Ludwig pulled him through into a side street, glancing momentarily at the signs. His brisk walk never slowed. Feliciano broke into a half-run, still confused, until they slowed behind a nondescript building.

Ludwig turned to him gravely.

'Do you know what has happened?'

'No, I don't. I woke up and the streets were empty, and I wanted to check out the square to see what was happening, but-Ludwig, what do you mean by the *Berlin* Wall?'

'I received the information this morning,' he said. 'All of West Berlin is surrounded by a barbed wire fence and guarded. It is to keep the Easterners from escaping here, apparently, but-' He broke their gaze. 'We are not allowed to leave.'

'But my brother is in the East,' Feliciano said. 'When am I allowed to see him again? You know where to get papers to cross, right? Or you can let me through, since you're an officer.'

Ludwig shifted uncomfortably. 'I cannot. It is not West officers guarding the barrier. They are East. I cannot do anything.'

The information didn't make sense. East guards had turned their guns on their own, and there was no way to cross any longer. Ludwig was never supposed to be helpless, because that simply didn't make sense.

'When is the Wall going down?'

'I do not know. Perhaps never.' Ludwig tugged at his uniform, shifting from foot to foot. 'Feliciano, it is not our decision to make on what happens to the city now. Perhaps it is better if we attempt to...adjust.'

'You want to give up?' Feliciano asked in disbelief. Ludwig's eyes flashed dangerously, body drawing up like a bird ready to strike, and Feliciano flinched back.

'Do you think I want to see my city divided? The Red Army has no right to do this. If the Americans do not help, we are powerless. Under orders, we can do nothing but watch. I want to tear down that barbed wire with my bare hands, Feliciano. But I am ordered to step down, and I-I obey my orders.' His eyes shimmered faintly, pale pink high in his cheeks, and he turned away with a snap of boot on cobblestone. Feliciano could see his breaths held in his trembling hands, and reached out to touch his shoulder. Ludwig stiffened, and then his tension slackened.

'You should go,' he said, still staring at his hands.

'I have to go to the gallery,' Feliciano protested weakly. Ludwig turned back, expression carefully neutral.

'Not today. People are scared and dangerous today. Nobody will be buying, regardless. You should go home and stay safe.'

'What about you? You're an officer.'

He smiled slightly. 'It is my duty. Besides, I am a captain. I will be fine.' He looked down, now seeming unsure again. 'I can walk you to your house, if you want.'

'I would.' Feliciano settled in beside him as they walked, hands brushing again and again, but neither of them made an effort to step away. Feliciano could feel the heat rising to his face, and searched for something to talk about.

'Do you really think the Wall will stand forever?'

'No.' Ludwig looked surprised at his own answer. 'But it will stand for a long time, long after we are forgotten. Nothing lasts forever.'

'But you just said it, Ludwig! Memories. Like writing, and music, and art.' Feliciano hummed a few lines of the song he remembered from last night. Ludwig was looking at him with a strange expression.

'You think they're memories?'

'Oh, yes. Have you ever heard this one? *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.* It's from a poetry book Romano got me. Well, he only pretended to give it to me because he didn't want to admit he'd bought it. The sonnet is about a man, and his memory is preserved because he was written about.'

Ludwig had been staring, with that expression again, as Feliciano recited the poetry, and abruptly coughed and looked away. 'I have heard that sonnet, actually. But the man wasn't preserved, only the idea of who he was.'

'I'd like to be remembered at all.' Feliciano felt warm and safer, and sang a few more bars of the Elvis song. The sunlight felt warmer away from the guns, and it was glinting through Ludwig's eyes and hair just like he'd thought. 'What do you want to be remembered for?'

'My duty. I'm one of the youngest captains.'

Feliciano nearly giggled. 'No, I want to know what you want, not your uniform. What do you like to do? I like to cook and I'd like to read more poetry. I'd like to become a famous artist.'

Ludwig took a moment to respond. 'I would like to...would have liked to take care of my dogs more.'

'You have dogs?' Feliciano exclaimed.

'They're at my...my brother's house.' Ludwig nodded in the direction of the Wall, jaw tense. 'He lives in the East.'

Feliciano felt terrible. 'He's trapped there?'

Ludwig barked a rough laugh. 'Gilbert Beilschmidt is anything but a prisoner to the East.'

Feliciano couldn't figure out what the tone was that Ludwig used when speaking about his brother. Derision and hurt echoed through his voice.

'Didn't he tell you to go live in the West?' Feliciano asked slowly.

'Yes. Yesterday, right before I met you. I don't normally take the late train.'

They both fell silent, thinking. Ludwig's hands curled into fists. The question hovered between them.

'Did he know the Wall would go up?' Feliciano whispered. Ludwig didn't answer for a long minute. They neared Feliciano's flat, and Ludwig stood in front of him, blue eyes piercing.

'I choose to believe he did not,' he said quietly. 'There must be some things in this world that are chance, and perhaps some are inevitable. No matter what led to it, I am in the West now.'

'I'm glad,' Feliciano said. 'I'm glad you're here.'

Ludwig looked surprised, his eyebrows raising before he forced his face back into sternness. Feliciano didn't like it when he tried to be cold like the rest of the officers.

'I'm glad you're here, too.'

'On this side of the city,' Feliciano clarified. He didn't know how to phrase his next words, and they spilled out in a rush. 'You're here now, and we don't know what is going to happen, but you should stay safe, too. Because I still need to finish the painting, and because I want to see you again.'

Ludwig studied him for a long moment before he nodded. 'I will.'

'Promise me you'll come.'

'I promise.' Ludwig took a deep breath and smoothed back his hair. 'I need to return to my post, but I will see you tonight.' He nodded once, solemnly, and left, his footsteps clicking on the ground.

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Feliciano had written and thrown away two separate ideas of a letter to Lovino. It didn't matter. The city was surrounded, and he might never see his brother again. Even if the Wall fell one day, there were people now hurting from it.

The song spun in the background again. Feliciano was sketching, but everything turned out with sharp eyes and that inscrutable expression. He was interrupted by the doorbell.

'Ludwig! You're safe, and-you don't look hurt!'

'Yes, the crowds calmed down, and nobody was hurt.' Ludwig stepped inside, fixing Feliciano with his gaze again. 'Some people tried to escape to the West. Some of them made it, but I saw one get shot. Promise me you won't try to convince your brother to join you here. And promise me you will never go so near the border again. I do not want you to get hurt.'

'I promise,' Feliciano said, feeling slightly overwhelmed. Ludwig nodded, and then his commander's air faded. He awkwardly held out a book. 'I saw this in a shop as I was walking here and thought you might like it. It's a book of poetry.'

'For me? Thank you!' Feliciano excitedly leafed through the pages. 'This is amazing, thank you! I should give you something, Ludwig, since you saved me and now you gave me poetry. Have you eaten yet? I can cook.'



'I have.' He looked flustered. 'Feliciano, this isn't a debt you need to pay back.'

'I'm going to take you out to eat soon,' Feliciano decided. 'But you have to tell me where we're going, because I haven't gone to many restaurants yet.'

Ludwig just looked at him, a smile warring with that confusing, fond expression. 'If you're sure.'

'I am. Sit down, I'm almost done painting.'

# Chapter Three

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The finished painting was beautiful. Feliciano stood and stared at it, amazed that his own hands could have created such a thing after so long stuck. Even more amazing was that Ludwig still sat there in front of him. He wanted to touch him again, like he'd wanted to since the first time, but he couldn't. Lovino knew about his preferences, but Feliciano knew that anyone else knowing would be disastrous. Even if Ludwig was kinder than the other officers and beautiful in a way that made him dizzy, Feliciano would hold his tongue and his foolish heart.

It didn't stop him from letting himself lean into the touch on his shoulder as Ludwig turned to go, and falling into the look in his eyes.

'There's an art gallery,' Feliciano said in a rush, 'near the Wall now. You-if you have a day off, you should come. I want to see you.'

'I may not for a while,' Ludwig said. His hand shifted, and his fingertips grazed Feliciano's jaw. His expression was pained. 'I was assigned to guard the checkpoint against...threats. It will be dangerous, and I need to be there.'

'You'll be okay,' Feliciano reassured, more for himself. 'You're an officer, and you're brave and loyal.' The word *loyal* caught in his throat. 'What do you do when someone tries to cross?'

'When enemies of the state attempt to cross, we apprehend them by any means necessary and deliver them back to...' Ludwig recited, before he stopped. He looked unsteady. 'I'm sorry, what did you say?'

Feliciano couldn't shake the veil of discomfort. 'They're not enemies. They're people. Just people who have those they love on this side of the Wall.'

He didn't like the way Ludwig had delivered the line *by any means necessary*. Nobody was the *enemy* anymore. That was what it meant when the war had ended. He gripped his shoulder and turned him to face. Ludwig looked down at him, but his eyes were troubled.

'Just people,' he repeated quietly.

'Are you ordered to...shoot them, Ludwig?'

'Yes,' he whispered. 'But I have never done it.' His hand cupped his face now, stroking in slow circles. Feliciano raised his own hand to cover it.

'Would you?' he breathed, staring into those conflicting blue eyes.

Ludwig's hand stilled. His eyes were blank and cold.

'I need to go,' he said. Feliciano heard his words through a haze. Ludwig couldn't be the same as the rest of the guards. From that first night on the train, he had to have been different. He let go, unwilling to believe, and Ludwig straightened his collar.

'Goodbye, Feliciano.' He looked like he was about to say something more, but instead he turned abruptly and left, shoulders back, every inch a soldier. Feliciano watched him go. The loss of what had been perfect ached.

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Ludwig's head was pounding and the world spun by the time he got into his post. He shouldn't have drank. He hadn't drank like that in a long time, but he needed to stop the thoughts of how Feliciano had *looked* at him, demanding to know answers to all the questions he'd never asked. His skin still tingled with the pressure of artist's hands holding his, and the way he'd said *just people*.

They were all people, he thought, settling into the metal coffin of an outpost. The Americans had told him over and over that escapees were dangerous, that they would kill him, that they could ruin everything. Just like what he felt for Feliciano.

The weight of his gun pressed heavy against his ribs, nearly against his ribs and breath. Ludwig pulled the Luger out and rested it on the table. His head swam. The world blurred.

*Would you?* Feliciano had asked, those golden eyes holding him in place, looking past his uniform, past his uncertainties, setting him alight. The order of uniform was all Ludwig had ever known, and this artist, this impossible, beautiful artist, burned that to ash. It was madness to change everything because of one person, the same desperate madness that must lead people to jump the Wall.

Ludwig slowly picked up the gun and unloaded the clip. Every motion was practiced. He slid the clip into his pocket and the gun into his holster and sat back, feeling like he could breathe for once.

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It was a long time before Feliciano saw Ludwig again. Life in the split city became an everyday thing, and as much as Feliciano wished he could go back to the unhurried, simple way things had been before everything changed that night of the Wall, Ludwig still lingered in his thoughts. He placed the painting in the gallery, and painting became easier again, but he could never stop thinking. If Ludwig was just another guard, he would hate him, but Feliciano knew he was better.

Francis had been distractible and dreamy since the last night. Feliciano finished a deal with the latest American soldier interested in paintings like Warhol, which weren't always his style, but Americans were always excitable and paid well-and found him hunched over a workbench, detailing the fire-coloured spirals in a poem.

'Feliciano,' he greeted, blinking up blearily, but his smile was wide and bright. 'Oh, Feliciano, I have never felt so passionate about a poem before. Beauty is the only thing I need. Besides

alcohol on some days.'

'Who did you meet?' Feliciano asked curiously. Francis had refused to say details, but he had clearly been dazzled by them.

'The David to my Michelangelo,' Francis said with a wink. 'What about you?'

'It doesn't matter,' Feliciano said, carefully hiding the jolt of pain he felt at being reminded of Ludwig.

'Are you sure? Someone came by yesterday to look at your painting.' He nodded to Ludwig's portrait. 'He was looking for you.'

'Did he say his name?' Feliciano asked, hope lighting in him like a firework of colour in a world gone back to grey. Ludwig had come back. 'What did he look like?'

'His name was Officer Ludwig Beilschmidt.' Francis unbent from over his desk, and for the first time Feliciano could see the design of the poem. It was a distinctive maple leaf. 'He said that if anyone wanted to find him, most days after work, he was near a bar named the Cuckoo's Egg.'

Feliciano couldn't believe it. 'Does that-mean that mean I can see him now? Oh, thank you, Francis, I thought I'd lost him.'

'Why?'

Their argument over orders rushed back to him in an instant, and Feliciano felt cold. But maybe, maybe, he'd reconsidered.

'It doesn't matter now, as long as I can talk to him.' He nodded decisively, and locked the rest away.

He ran down towards the bar, scanning the streets around for blue eyes, for recognition, and a pair of heavy arms suddenly wrapped around him, pulling him around to bright eyes. His grip tightened, gloved hands stroking circles at his wrists.

'Feliciano,' Ludwig said, quiet and intense.

'Ludwig,' Feliciano said back, lightheaded with relief. 'I thought-thought you...oh, *Ludwig*.'

He smiled slightly. 'I am a guard, Feliciano. That will never change. But what you asked...' He inclined his head, eyes never leaving his. 'They are just people. And I understand them.'

Feliciano nearly collapsed against him. Ludwig understood, and that was better than anything.

Ludwig held him up, careful pressure against his chest, and Feliciano closed his eyes and nearly laughed because all he wanted was to be closer.

'I'm glad,' he said. Ludwig's hand shifted against his hair, and in a moment, they both realized how they must look. Ludwig let go first, hand lingering against his for a moment more.

'Can I talk to you?' he asked, falling into step beside him as they continued towards the bar.

'I heard you saw my painting,' Feliciano began. He was nearly giddy now. Ludwig looked more at ease than he had before, loose and aware, his tie loosened.

'It was very good.' Ludwig looked up, eyes serious. 'I am sorry for what happened. Orders...orders are not always right.'

'I know,' he whispered, and Ludwig turned to him, touching his cheek like he had before. 'You are not just a guard.'

That small quirk of a smile that made Feliciano's heart flutter. 'Tell me what I am, then.'

*Beautiful*, Feliciano wanted to say, but even if Ludwig was back, saying foolish things was still dangerous. 'Maybe you could be an artist, too. After all of this is over.'

'After all of this is over. After the Wall falls. Perhaps.' They continued walking. 'You know, orders built the Wall, but it will be the people who tear it down.' Ludwig still looked surprised at himself for saying such things, and his body momentarily tensed, drawing up in anticipation before he forced himself to focus again.

'How do you know?'

'There is a group of...revolutionaries in the East. If anyone will pull down the Wall, it will be them.'

'How do you know about them?' Feliciano couldn't help smiling. He hadn't expected Ludwig to have any connections to revolutionaries. He wondered if that was the secret, important thing Lovino was doing.

Ludwig's expression twisted. 'My brother was once part of them.'

'Did something happen to him?' Feliciano tried, unsure of how to ask further. Ludwig laughed and strode ahead.

'He doesn't matter. Not now.' He stopped at the door to the bar and looked in. 'I did agree to lunch. This isn't the best place in Berlin for food, but the drinking is good.'

They sat down, Ludwig resting his hands on the table, palms-up.

'Did you like the poetry book?' he asked almost bashfully. 'I-I admit I am not one for the arts as much as you think I am, but-'

'It was amazing,' Feliciano insisted. The poetry book had been bookmarked and annotated in the margins in a clean, neat cursive, full of thoughts and wondering. The last owner had written paragraphs around certain odes. 'I wonder who owned it first. They understood what I

told you about memories. These words have been preserved for so long because they meant so many different things to so many people. I think that's wonderful.'

'Do you have any words you would have wanted preserved?'

'Well...' Feliciano smiled, daring to do something possibly dangerous, but all of this had always been dangerous and Ludwig made him feel invincible. 'It's my brother who's the writer, but if someone was to think of me when they were gone, I'd like them to remember...ti amo.'

'Ti amo,' Ludwig repeated. Feliciano shivered. 'Italian, correct? It sounds like poetry.'

'Francis says poetry is just a way to describe beauty. This is, too.' His heart was fluttering. He reached forward to loosen his tie further and Ludwig's hand wrapped loosely around his, fingers twining. He pulled it to his lips with that smile, almost kissing, and Feliciano couldn't even think.

'Tell me what it means,' he insisted.

Could it be that he felt the same way? Feliciano couldn't dare to believe that. Playful words and careless touching was different than risking everything. But God, Feliciano was willing to risk it if Ludwig understood.

'It means I love you,' he said, heart in his throat, trapped by those piercing blue eyes. A couple strands of hair had come undone and Feliciano wanted to run his hands through that severe haircut and feel only him. Ludwig blinked, and his grip tightened.

'Feliciano,' he rasped.

'Hey, you're that artist from that gallery!' someone exclaimed, and Ludwig dropped his hand and jerked away, automatically distancing themselves. Feliciano felt a flash of irrational anger at the intruder. He should feel scared instead that someone had seen them, but he couldn't, not when they'd just been so close.

An American dropped down in a seat beside him. Although he was dressed in street clothes, his flight jacket hung over a nearby chair. Feliciano recognized him-he had bought something a few days ago.

'So, I heard you two talking, and I was wondering if you could help me.' He looked up earnestly, but Feliciano felt sick. They had been caught, and now they would be blackmailed or jailed or sent off to some labour camp in Russia, never to see each other again. How could he have been so stupid? Underneath the table, he saw Ludwig slowly pull out his gun.

'What do you want?' Ludwig asked coldly. 'We're busy.'

The American raised his hands placatingly, his exuberant eyes more serious. 'I heard you say ti amo.'

All three of them heard the click of Ludwig flicking off the safety. The American froze. Ludwig looked deadly. 'What's your name, soldier?'

'First lieutenant Alfred F. Jones, Air Force,' he said, eyes fixed on the barrel of the gun, but he kept his voice steady, hands clenching into rhythmic fists on the surface of the table. 'I swear, I'm not going to tell anyone.'

'How can we be sure?' Ludwig asked. Feliciano could see the tension in his shoulders.

'I think I know what it means already. Amo. That means love, right?' He shifted closer to Feliciano, his boyish expression solidifying into intensity. 'I want to learn how to say it. There's someone I'm meeting.'

'Who?' Ludwig demanded.

'He'll be in soon,' Alfred said, and his hands trembled only slightly, but he smiled. 'Arthur Kirkland. He's a British soldier.'

In his current state, Feliciano found it almost funny, a laugh bubbling up from the knot of terror and tension in his chest. What were the chances that the one person who heard them was like them? Or at the very least, like him. He chanced a glance towards Ludwig, wondering what he was thinking but only feeling worse. Maybe he had assumed differently about all of this and didn't want to be like Alfred and Feliciano was. Maybe he found it disgusting that Feliciano had assumed he was like that and now hated him.

He was looking back, eyes wide, such an open expression. There was no hate there, only quiet understanding and want. They held the gaze for a moment more before Ludwig nodded and put his gun away. Hands shaking with all his emotions spilling out-Ludwig felt the same!-Feliciano turned to Alfred.

'Try to copy how I say it. Ti amo,' he repeated. Alfred tried again, but his pronunciation was terrible. They only got through a few repetitions, his accent still making Feliciano wince, before the door jingled.

Alfred sat up, locking eyes with the man at the door, and his expression changed from concentration to absolute exuberance. Without saying goodbye, he was out of the chair and at their table, his eyes lit up like fireworks as he gazed at Arthur. That, more than anything, proved what he had said.

Feliciano sat back, feeling exhausted and charged. The few inches of space between them felt heavy with energy.

'So Alfred is...like that,' he started. Ludwig's expression closed off.

'I assume so.'

Stunned by the sudden change in his tone, Feliciano sat back. 'Ludwig? Is something wrong? Do you...hate that?'

'No, it's not that I hate it.' He exhaled and pushed his hands across the table. 'Alfred doesn't understand that people can be jailed for what he speaks of. My brother told me about that. He should be more careful.'

Feliciano touched his gloved hand, at a loss for words. 'They're just people who love.'

'I know. I know.' Ludwig took his hand. He looked older, wearier. 'Maybe in some better time-after the Wall falls-people could love openly. Until then, I can wait.'

His heart was pounding again, and they were so close. 'Ludwig, you're-'

The door was thrown open and this time, Ludwig held onto his hand. The figure at the door wore an American uniform and spoke in clipped tones, ordering soldiers and police to the border, but Feliciano barely heard him. He was too dizzy from the heavy weight of a strong chest against his, Ludwig holding him close in protection. The bar full of soldiers began to clamour and rise.

'What's happening?' Feliciano asked, holding on tighter.

'Altercation at the border. Everyone is needed there.' He let go, but Feliciano didn't move. He could hear the quickening of his heart.

'I don't want you to get hurt.'

'It's not my choice. The Americans command us to fight or not.' He bent his head, gazing intently into his eyes. 'Feliciano, listen to me. The Americans could burn this city to the ground tonight. Swear to me that you'll leave Berlin tonight. Take the next train to West Germany.'

'I can't,' Feliciano said, his eyes stinging. 'Not if you're still here.'

'What happens to me doesn't matter.'

'It matters!' Feliciano cried. 'You could die tonight. I-I want to see you again.' He had nearly said I love you.

'If you refuse to leave, I cannot make you.' Ludwig rested his head on his shoulder, lips brushing his ear. 'Feliciano Vargas, you impossible, incredible thing. Do you know how dangerous all of this can be?'

'It'll be worth it.'

'This feeling is always worth it,' Ludwig murmured. 'Tonight. I will see you at the gallery tonight.'

'What if it's too dangerous?'

'I'm an officer. I'm sure I can survive one more night in this city.'

They broke apart and turned around to see Alfred and Arthur, and the American's quick, adoring smile as he kissed the other's knuckles. The British soldier, Arthur, stiffened as he looked up at Ludwig. Beside him, Alfred was tense and drawn. Feliciano wanted to tell him not to worry. People like them had to be kind in unkind worlds.



Ludwig nodded, as if sealing a pact, and muttered something before marching away. Feliciano watched him go before Arthur motioned him out the door.

Arthur walked quickly, his brow furrowed. Feliciano hurried to keep up.

'I'm keeping you safe for a bit,' Arthur said. 'In case the city gets bombed.'

'It won't. It's probably just a political dissent at the border with a group of revolutionaries.' Realizing how suspicious that must have sounded, he added, 'Ludwig told me about them.'

Arthur hummed, looking back at him. 'Ludwig. Is that his name? How do you know each other?'

Feliciano didn't know if Arthur was also like him, or if the American had just fallen for him. 'We...we're just friends.' Even if he wanted to be so much more. He watched apprehensively for any sign of Arthur's disgust, but he looked nervous instead, like he was working up the courage to say something.

'I understand what you two are like,' he said. 'My friend-Alfred, the American, you know-overheard you. He didn't realize, but I did.'

Feliciano stopped, irrationally hopeful. He wanted someone he could trust with the complicated knowledge of Ludwig. If Arthur was like them...he could only hope.

'Don't tell anyone,' he whispered. 'Please. I mean, you can tell if you want about me, even my brother knows, but...' Fear suddenly chilled the hope. He should have pretended it was unrequited, and he had to fix this, scrambling for something to say. 'Ludwig said his brother argued with him about-'

'I won't,' Arthur blurted. His face had gone red, his breathing quick. They studied each other cautiously, hopefully, neither daring to be the first to say. 'Your...your Ludwig saw Alfred and I.'

Pushing down the thrill of the words *your Ludwig*, Feliciano pushed on questioning. He wanted to know if Arthur knew. 'Is Alfred the same way?'

Arthur's expression suddenly closed off, bitter pain flashing through in his smile. 'No. It's just me.'

Feliciano thought of the way Alfred had looked at him and his smile and the way he'd offered so much to strangers to find out a simple phrase. 'Oh. But I thought...if you say so.'

'I do.' Arthur turned and stalked ahead.

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Seeing the British base had left Feliciano in a good mood. The soldiers hadn't been as loud as the Americans, but they'd talked earnestly when Feliciano mentioned lines he remembered from his poetry book. Apparently the heavily annotated poems had been from a man called Keats. They had tried to offer him tea several times, which Feliciano had refused, but the

situation at the border had gotten better. Word said soldiers or guards in the West weren't killed, but he still worried about whoever had been in the East.

He waited outside the gallery, passing Francis, who was chain-smoking and staring into the street.

'Waiting for someone, mon ami?' he asked. His crooked smile betrayed his own nervousness.

'He promised to come. I hope he's okay.'

'The officer?' Francis asked, motioning for him to sit down. Feliciano settled beside him, and Francis draped his coat over him, tutting softly about keeping out the cold.

'Ludwig...follows orders a lot,' Feliciano said. 'Even if they're wrong.'

'His brother does the same thing.'

Feliciano looked up in surprise. 'You know his brother?'

'Gilbert Beilschmidt was one of my best friends,' Francis said almost wistfully, but his eyes were hard and cold. 'He taught his little brother everything. How to follow orders, how to serve his country, how to think, how to live.'

'Ludwig isn't just a guard,' Feliciano argued. 'He understands that the people in the East are just that.'

'Oh, Feliciano.' Francis stroked his hair. 'If anyone can make that man see sense, I suppose it would be you. But you play a dangerous game. You know what the punishment is for being with him in the way you want.'

Feliciano's heart sunk. 'I know.'

'And yet you still go ahead?'

He only nodded. Francis took a deep draw of his cigarette. 'I should warn you, then,' he murmured, 'that you should know the reason he is in the West now is because his brother threw him out of their house in the East the night the Wall went up.'

'Why?' Feliciano cried, aghast. No wonder Ludwig sounded the way he did about Gilbert.

'That is for him to tell you, not me.' Francis nudged him up towards the figure in the distance walking down the street. 'I would be a liar and a hypocrite if I told you I didn't want you to be with him. You...shine when you're with him. But be careful.'

Feliciano just laughed, weary and amazed. Nothing about them had ever been careful. Love was never careful, and that was what was so wonderful about it. The reckless abandon of losing themselves in each other was what had drawn them together in the first place.

'Thank you, Francis,' he said, and ran off to meet Ludwig.

'You're safe,' was the first thing Feliciano said, and then his heavy fear and relief all tangled into a knot in his throat. Ludwig reached out for him and Feliciano let himself be held close to a quick heart and warm chest. He closed his eyes. Even if Francis had warned him against it-even though the whole world would warn them against it, he was lost to this.

'I don't make habits of losing fights. Antonio-the protester, didn't die. I made sure.' Ludwig let him go, and Feliciano reluctantly stepped back.

'I'm glad.'

'I follow my orders, Feliciano. But I can be...human, past that.' He held out a hand, the moonlight painting him something ethereal. 'Do you want to walk?'

Feliciano took his hand, almost disbelieving of the offer, but the grip was solid. 'I'd like that.'

The question he'd wanted to ask since the morning still lingered.

'Ludwig, you said that one day, people could love freely, but until then, you'd wait.' He didn't dare glance up at him, counting their steps and his quick breaths. His pulse echoed in his ears. Ludwig shifted beside him.

'Feliciano, look at me.'

He did, unsure, but when he looked up, conflict warred in those blue eyes.

'It's complicated, Feliciano. My brother knows that people can be jailed or killed for...being like you say, and so he...' He swallowed, raw emotion flashing across his face, voice a low, desperate rasp. 'Feliciano, please.'

'You said he talked to you about it.'

Ludwig tilted his head, eyes shining in the light. 'More than that.' His hands slid around the side of Feliciano's head, pressing against the small of his back, holding him steady, like Ludwig was afraid of what would happen if they were closer. His eyes were overbright, desperate. 'He argued with me the night the Wall went up for a reason. That was the reason I left that night, the reason I was on the train when I found you.'

*That is for him to tell you*, Francis had said, and in an instant, Feliciano understood, and he ached for him. The eyes of the law was one thing, but to face his brother was another.

'My grandfather,' Feliciano said shakily, reaching up to his face, 'realized who I preferred and told me never to tell anyone. I think I fall in love too easily, Ludwig, with this city, with the art, with the people. With you. But you are not something shameful to be kept hidden.' The world was blurring, the streetlights making halos around Ludwig's head. His eyes were blue, blue as the sky. 'I am an artist. I fall in love with beautiful things.'

'You think I'm beautiful?' Ludwig asked, that tiny, maddening quirk of a smile back on his face, wondering and awestruck and adoring. Feliciano's heart was a buzz in his ears. 'When I saw you on the train, you made me believe there could be something for someone like me. A

guard who had those kinds of preferences. You have no idea, Feliciano Vargas, what you can do to me.'

'You have never just been a guard,' Feliciano said through his swelling, singing emotion and the tears in his throat before Ludwig whispered *ti amo* against his temple, holding him in the moonlit streets of Berlin.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Cities built around churches

# Chapter Four

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

From the point on his forehead where Ludwig kissed, his whole body seemed to grow warmer and lighter until the only thing holding him down to Earth was Ludwig's hands, pressing against his back, cupping his face, calloused but gentle.

He could feel the sparrow-quick flutter of his heart and the heat of Ludwig's arms around him through the stiff fabric, all his power contained here. He slowly reached up and spread his hand across the plane of his shoulder, allowing himself for the first time to wonder and feel about what it would be like. It was unyielding, hard muscle, and he felt a thrill of delight, sparking through his stomach and his fingertips. He was *allowed* this. Ludwig was letting him touch like he'd wanted to ever since they'd met on the train. He could feel that smile against his forehead, and thought dizzily that if he felt any more, he'd shatter into a starburst.

'What did I ever do to deserve you, Feliciano?' he whispered, his deep voice fond and rough around the edges, wrapping him in that safe warmth. 'This is such a dangerous world. The Wall came, and everything felt angry and warlike again. But you found me, and you made me realize that there was more to it all. To Berlin. To myself. How mad we must be, to love in such a mad world.' His hand traced small circles around his back. Feliciano could smell his clean soap and fabric and the tang of gunpowder, completely lost to this feeling, of the words he said, the quiet tone and emotion resonating with him. Ludwig's hand brushed under his eyes before he stilled. 'Am I saying the wrong thing?'

'No.' Feliciano leaned into him, the broad depth of his chest, lightheaded and beaming, trying to wipe at his eyes. The lights shone brighter tonight. 'You're saying the right thing. Everything I want to hear.'

'Everything? Can I say...*ich liebe dich*?'

'What does that mean?' Feliciano gazed up at him, sure he could simply stay safe here forever, gazing up into Ludwig's eyes. He smiled, and it made him look nothing like the cold, intimidating guard Feliciano had seen on the train, save for his blue eyes.

'You said it like *'ti amo*.'

Feliciano laughed, sure that nothing could ever be wrong again as long as Ludwig was beside him.

'*Ich liebe dich*, then, Ludwig!' He giggled, unable to keep his bubbling euphoria inside. 'You know, you look so much better when you smile. Less intimidating. I'd always want you to be smiling, except you probably can't smile at people going through the checkpoint.'

'Intimidating.' Ludwig hummed a laugh against his neck, fingertip tracing the hollow underneath his ear. 'I thought it was my *uniform* you said was intimidating.'

His face filled with heat and he scrambled for something to say, and Ludwig's mouth twitched, just enough that Feliciano realized he was trying not to laugh.

'It is,' he finally managed to say without stammering or thinking of how *good* Ludwig really looked with the sharp fabric. 'So you should-maybe you should take it off again. And I'll *paint* you again.' He rolled the word *paint* in his mouth. He wasn't going to *lose* this, after all- he was Italian.

This time, Ludwig flushed red, and to Feliciano's delight, he didn't come up with anything to say back.

'That sounds good,' was all he mumbled. He ducked his head. The back of his neck was red as well. 'But- not tonight. I need to get back to my post.'

'I know,' Feliciano said, knowing the world still went on. He traced Ludwig's face, admiring all his sharp angles. 'You know, you really are beautiful. I'll tell you that a thousand times until you can see it too. You have never been just the guard you think you are.'

'You change everything,' Ludwig said softly, eyes skimming over every inch of him like Ludwig wanted to be able to remember *everything*.

'This is a city where one night can do that,' Feliciano said. He slid their fingers together. 'I didn't even need the whole night to realize I loved you. My nonno used to say falling in love was like a flash, that the world was normal until the love was *there*, and there so wonderfully it shocked you. But it wasn't like that. It was that you're beautiful and you were there and I felt like I already knew you, as soon as we met.' He leaned up and kissed his temple. 'There are different kinds of love. Romantic, platonic, rivalries, tragedies-'

'We can't be a tragedy.' He was smiling broadly now, looking so alive and delighted with himself that Feliciano wanted to kiss him like a deep-set ache. But he wouldn't, not in the street. He settled for gazing at him, taking in every detail of him, so beautiful in the moonlight.

'Tomorrow,' Feliciano said determinedly- if he stayed any longer he *would* kiss him- 'come to my studio, okay? I want to teach you how to draw.'

'I'm not the artist here, Feliciano,' he said, blue eyes catching his and seeing *everything*.

'You can be gentle.' Feliciano took his hand, pressing their palms together. 'I know you can. Tomorrow, whenever your post lets you go. Come see me.'

He nodded, serious and soldier-like again, but his eyes were soft.

'Tomorrow,' he said. He made as if to turn, but at the last second gripped his shoulder and kissed his cheek, soft and burningly hot. His blue eyes shone, surprised and pleased with himself, before he left.

Feliciano leaned against a lamppost, dizzy and giddy, touching the spot on his cheek that still tingled, and watched him go. The world fell together with him in it. Berlin wasn't home

without him, and Feliciano wondered how it ever was before.

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He couldn't concentrate on his work. The Americans wanted pop art, bright and psychedelic Pollock works, but Feliciano doodled Ludwig again and couldn't keep his smile off his face.

'Mon ami,' Francis said. By his expression, he'd repeated it more than once before. Feliciano sat up, brushing his hair from his face. He should stop smiling, but he couldn't.

'Francis!'

'I asked if your night went well.' Francis sighed, no reprimand in his voice, and sat down next to him. He had that dreamy look in his eyes again.

'It went...' Feliciano thought he might look the same way, but he still felt light and perfect. 'Wow.'

'Thought so.' Francis idly traced lines on the table, spiraling curls. 'Oh, Feliciano. How glorious it is to be in love.'

Even though the city still bristled and the Wall still stood, Feliciano couldn't help agreeing.

He drifted, a giddy, dreaming mess, until afternoon when the doors opened and the whole room *sharpened*. It was like everyone snapped to attention as the soldier entered, wary and intrigued.

Feliciano turned to see him, blue eyes crinkled around the edges as he offered a private smile, hands spreading out in offer. The world was bright around him, the worry he hadn't known had been knotted in his shoulders all day releasing, and Feliciano broke into a run. Ludwig caught him and held him close, murmuring gentle German against his forehead, and Feliciano drifted- before he suddenly released him and stepped away. He wouldn't meet his eyes, and his body was rigid with tension. Feliciano felt cold, but he understood. It would ruin Ludwig if their secret got out, and yet he still risked it all for him.

'Can I show you something?' Feliciano asked, holding out his hands. Ludwig still wouldn't look at him, but nodded sharply, like an order.

They walked through the silent room. Ludwig raised his head again, icy blue eyes scanning, piercing, until everyone dropped their gaze and pretended to work again.

When they finally made it to the back room, covered in bright murals, usually highlighted by the spotless blue Thunderbird car, Ludwig's stiff posture broke.

'I am... sorry,' he rasped. Feliciano couldn't find the right words to console him, and reached out to make him meet his eyes.

'It's not your fault.'

His smile showed crooked, a strange thing for him, wild and curious. 'It is never our fault, but that does not mean I can change things.'

'I know.' Feliciano let himself embrace him, be closer to that warmth for a dangerous second before they both stepped away, hiding this painful agreement in the daylight. 'I wanted to teach you to draw. I think you'd be good at it.'

'If you say so.' He straightened up again, eyes aware but calmer. He held his hands out again, palms-up, the black leather stretching over his knuckles, and his smile turned back to that secretive, beautiful thing that Feliciano knew. 'Tell me what to do.'

'First, you have to take these off,' Feliciano told him. Ludwig just chuckled and allowed him to. His hands were warm, with callouses around the knuckles and on the palm at the base of the fingers, like one would get from lifting weights. Feliciano couldn't help his fascination with them for a moment, and he pressed their palms together. Ludwig coughed, suddenly, and took his hand away. He looked endearing with the embarrassed blush.

'What's the first step?'

Feliciano led him to the table beside the mural. They sat down, and he guided him through the steps.

'It's just another set of rules, Ludwig. In the beginning, at least. I do things like that.' He gestured to a half-finished painting leaning on a nearby easel that showed a woman made of unraveling strings. 'But for now, just follow my lead.'

His brows were furrowed in concentration and his hair was slowly coming undone, sticking up at the back and around the ears. Feliciano wanted to run his hands through it.

'Feliciano? How do you do the shading?'

The question snapped him out of his reverie, and he hurried to show the crosshatching again, hoping Ludwig couldn't see his blush. He was making impressive progress after Feliciano had told him simply to follow the rules.

By the end of the drowsy sunlit hour, Ludwig could draw rough-edged sketches. Feliciano thought they were endearing in the same way his blush had been. They sat close together at the table, Feliciano nearly drifting off against his solid shoulder. He was too close to sleep and happy to think too much, and so he let himself talk, commenting on Ludwig's careful, deliberate drawings, letting his eyes wander up to the pale skin exposed against the stiff cuff of his uniform, and the sharp cut of it against his collarbone, and the way the afternoon light threw shadows across his face and made all his clean-cut lines severe and striking.

Ludwig had stopped drawing, and was looking down at him with a strange expression. Feliciano realized he might have said his thoughts aloud, but he couldn't force himself to do more than smile, anticipation tingling at his fingertips.

'You never know when to stop talking,' Ludwig said, confused and exasperated and so fond Feliciano's heart jumped.



'Then can I say this?' He'd practiced the words alone, the unfamiliar, thrilling weight of them. *'Ich liebe dich.'*

It was worth trying to pronounce the words correctly just to see the way his blue eyes widened and he seemed to instinctively move closer, until they were at kissing distance. Feliciano tilted his head back, mouth dry, wanting to pull him in and kiss him. Ludwig's gaze moved down to his mouth, lingering for a heartbeat too long before he dragged it back up.

Ludwig was thinking the same thing and it made his heart race and his breath catch.

'How sheltered is this area, Feliciano?' His voice sounded unsteady, and it sent a thrill through him.

'Nobody will see us,' he promised, hearing his own voice crack. He wanted this, wanted it in a way he'd felt nothing before. 'I promise.'

'Promise?' Ludwig asked, his mouth quirking, and before Feliciano could answer, lips were pressed against his and he gasped. Ludwig tasted like the graphite and something sweet and something that might have been gunpowder. Feliciano was lit up from the inside and every place his hands touched, holding him carefully in place as the world spun into light and sound and nothing else. He leaned into it, lost to every detail, every way that they touched and the soft, incredible noise Ludwig made. When they broke apart, Feliciano touched his mouth, surprised he hadn't turned into pure starlight like he'd thought, or that he could even move at all.

'Oh,' he said. His mouth felt strange and *good*, bruised and soft. Ludwig was watching him, blue eyes blown wide and intense. His hand moved across his hair gently.

'I'm sorry.'

'Why?' Feliciano turned to him and buried his face in his neck, chasing more of that sweetness. His hands shook and his throat was thick with tears and nothing had ever been so good. His hand found Ludwig's, and they held on to keep from breaking because all of it was so *wonderful*. Feliciano never thought he would meet a guard who ended up being the impossible, amazing person whose name was Ludwig Beilschmidt and who had the brightest blue eyes.

'Was it good?' All his power seemed to fail, shoulders curling in, eyes wide. As much as his uniform changed him, Ludwig was just a man. A good man, who Feliciano could trust.

'It was perfect.' Feliciano leaned up to kiss him again, sliding his other hand into that perfect hair and pulling it into wild spikes. Their mouths met and he burned all over again as he heard Ludwig say, like he had on the street, *ti amo*.

:: The last embers of a fire

# Chapter Five

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Life had been easier before.

The hours blurred at the border, simple and regular as a heartbeat. Even after the Wall, Ludwig had fallen back into a rhythm of rules and order, as things always had been, as they should be for him. At least, he had tried to.

He thought he could figure Feliciano out, work him down to rules, but every time he thought he'd worked him out- artist, dreamer, *kind*, impossibly, in a place like this- he changed. Ludwig wanted to stop trying to figure it out, just let himself be amazed and awestruck, even if it was against everything he had worked by. Wasn't that the strangest thing, that he was willing to go through the danger for him when he didn't even understand?

Life would be easier if he didn't let himself fall for him. He'd be standing here at the checkpoint with a loaded gun and a clear head and his mouth and neck wouldn't still feel hot and bruised from kisses, but it wasn't that simple. In the end, Feliciano was home in a world of shouted orders and short breaths, he was everything and Ludwig's chest hurt thinking about him.

'Officer Beilschmidt, sir.'

'Yes?' He turned, carefully pushing away his thoughts. The clip he'd taken from his Luger weighed against his hip. The man eyed him, not meeting his gaze.

'The Americans are having...*issues* with the East guards. A military car was denied free access, and the situation may escalate.'

Irrationally, his mind turned to the American he'd met at the bar, with his free words and open face, young and unknowing of the world.

'Understood. Any orders?'

'Well, you and your men are at the checkpoint, sir.' He glanced up, his shoulders curving in. 'There is...rumours that there may be tanks. You don't have orders to leave your post.'

*They're just people.*

He thought of Feliciano, him laughing and smiling and watching the sky, the fierce, sun-bright force of his words, and the way he had tasted.

'Sir?'

'Orders are understood,' he said, hearing himself through a veil. 'You are dismissed.'

The man hesitated, wavering, and Ludwig saw fear and compassion bright in his greyish eyes. He turned away, gripping his too-light gun. 'Sir...'

'I said you were dismissed,' Ludwig said. After a moment, the door closed with a cold snap, and he slumped against the wall. The words were too harsh, too angry at someone who didn't deserve this. None of them deserved this except him, for slipping so easily into the uniform his brother had raised him for.

He'd stand his ground. For Feliciano, at least. After all, if there had to be a last night, the image of him with sunlight in his laughing gold eyes and his hair tangled around his fingers was something good. He smoothed his hair back, absentmindedly straightening his collar before walking out.

The men they gave him were wide-eyed and new, clutching their guns and uniforms. They weren't soldiers ready to fight, they were here to die if the Americans and Russians decided it. Ludwig looked them over, a knot of anger pulling against his chest. None of them would meet his eyes. He couldn't bring himself to tell them lies about what they would do today.

'There is a concrete room across the road from the checkpoint,' he said to the nearest, who squared his shoulders and nodded at the ground. 'Take your men. If anyone non-military is passing through, they're often inspected there.'

'Yes, sir,' he said, voice shaky but unhesitating. Ludwig watched them trail away, the knot loosening marginally. Nobody would be crossing today, unless they were completely mad. They'd be safe there, away from the phantom growl of tanks that weren't so far away.

He needed to get away from the checkpoints and the blood that would soak through concrete. As he walked through the impromptu camp, he expected someone to stop him, but nobody did. Ludwig leaned back against a wall and stripped off his gloves, trying to gather his thoughts before the storm. Someone moved in the shadows.

'Francis.'

'I'm glad you haven't forgotten my name.' He inclined his head gracefully.

He shouldn't be here. He didn't want to do this. Everything that had been Gilbert's, Ludwig wanted to rid himself of, down to the same cut of their jaws and bodies.

'I shouldn't be talking to you.'

'Did your brother tell you that?'

Ludwig recoiled, snapping still, wanting to shout and leave and rage all at once. Francis had no right to say that. 'No.'

His expression changed, and after a long moment where Ludwig debated leaving, he spoke. 'Feliciano.'

That was the one word that would make him listen, and they both knew it, how it broke him open. 'I know him. You saved him, didn't you? I heard the story.' Despite himself, Francis

smiled.

'I did what I had to do.' Ludwig couldn't meet his eyes, couldn't explain how if Feliciano had died he would have, too.

'He cares for you, you know. Even though you wear this uniform.'

It always came down to uniform. Ludwig jerked his head away. 'I know, Francis.'

He made a soft sound, calming and understanding, and he spoke again, though he shouldn't. 'He's just so idealistic and-' How did he started to explain Feliciano Vargas? The entire incredible concept of him was his art and his bright smile and everything he made him feel, none of which Ludwig could explain. 'He *is*. And I make foolish promises, but I mean them. For him.'

'Art has a way of doing that to you.'

*Art*. Wasn't that how it had all started? An artist and an officer and a war on the horizon.

*We are not a tragedy*, he had said, shining in the moonlight. He wanted to believe that.

'I have my duty,' he said, because that had been the only certain thing for so long, but even that seemed to be changing. 'Even for him, I don't think I can give that up. But I am willing to be less...' *Less blind, less devotional, less of Gilbert*. 'I will not shoot to kill,' he finished. He'd promised that, at least.

'That's good,' Francis said softly.

'It's the best I can do.' He wanted to see Feliciano suddenly with a sharp ache that dig through him and tore at his thoughts, sharp and pale like Gilbert. 'I'm sorry.'

'I'm not the one you should apologize to.'

The tanks still rumbled towards the border, surely. How many more people would die and be lost from memory before this war was done? Ludwig wanted to stop fighting, but what he and Gilbert had shouted over again and again was that if you didn't pick up the gun and uniform, they would find someone else, someone younger, trained with less honour, less knowledge about right and wrong.

Ludwig had thought he was doing the right thing, but Feliciano kept making him question.

'We shouldn't be talking.' They'd be missing him back at the border soon, and he already felt wrong leaving post without permission. 'Go.'

Francis didn't answer, and turned without looking back. Ludwig watched him go, and finally went back to the checkpoint.

Nobody questioned him. He could hear a rumble in the distance, of tanks of thunder. He found his post again, slid his gun away and his gloves on, and waited for lightning. It was then that he turned around and met a pair of copper-red eyes. He froze, trying to take him in,

rationalize his brother with the world across the Wall, try to fit his casual look with the words he'd spat at him that night-

*(I won't have someone like you as my brother. Get out, get out, I never want to see you again-)*

Gilbert Beilschmidt couldn't be here. He couldn't be back in Ludwig's life, because he'd fall apart again to try to fit him into a world that now had artists and painting and something tentatively better. Gilbert had all the ways to ruin him. He couldn't read his expression. He never could.

'Hello, baby brother. I didn't know you were working at the checkpoint too.' His wolf-smile flashed out, curious and slanting, and Ludwig couldn't look, couldn't breathe. He could feel the weight of his gun and for once wished he'd kept it loaded.

'Gilbert.' He wanted to spit out his own words, ask if he was if he was still such a *disgust* to his name, ask why Gilbert could stand to look at him now, ask him how it felt to be a traitor. But he didn't.

'Lutz.' And *that* hurt, too, the nickname. Nobody called him Lutz anymore. Nobody called him *baby brother*, because he'd left it all behind the concrete and barbed wire. Gilbert held out his hands like he'd be able to give back a safe world and Ludwig flinched back before he realized. 'I miss you.'

He didn't realize he'd pulled his gun out until the weight was in his hands, and every instinct he had screamed to ram it against that bloody new scar on his forehead and finish off someone else's work. He held himself back, not because of love but because if he pulled the empty trigger, and he would, he didn't know what would come next.

'I won't be speaking to the enemy,' he ground out. Gilbert's mouth pulled, and his gaze dropped to the paint smears on his gloves, the evidence of where he'd cupped Feliciano's face and pulled him closer, closer. His eyes narrowed, and Ludwig thought he would laugh for a second. If he had, he would have killed him.

What would Feliciano think of him, he dizzily wondered, such a destroyed thing with a brother like Gilbert. He didn't want to think of it, but he could see the crumple of his expression in slow motion, every frame saturated. He'd told him that Gilbert had told him about prison, but why would Feliciano still want him if he told the truth about what they'd shouted and raged at each other?

'You're lucky I don't shoot,' he whispered. The gun was light and his head was lighter. 'Not anymore.'

He turned on his heel and forced himself to walk back inside the concrete cell calmly, as if everything didn't feel like it was breaking. He could feel Gilbert's gaze on his back, heavy and unreadable. The tattoo on his back prickled.

Waiting for lightning. Hadn't Feliciano said something about how love was supposed to be like a flash, but instead, it just felt familiar? Ludwig thought he might have been born half in

love with him. It seemed people only loved too much or too little in this split city, by halves or wholly, and he knew which one he was, for better or worse.

So he waited, and watched the tanks draw closer, and thought about how order didn't work for this. It was easy, easy to live and die for orders. If they'd ordered it, Ludwig would stand still as the tanks shot. But away from this, in art galleries and under streetlights, the rules were different.

In the end, he could do nothing but wait. The hours stretched and the daylight slid down until it was dark. Ludwig turned his gun over and over in his hands, wondering and wondering. It was his choice, as simple and insignificant as it was, to refuse to shoot. It was enough.

He didn't know how long it had been before the door was opened and the order was given. There was no war, not today. Not today.

Ludwig got up, feeling blind and utterly drained, and started walking to an art gallery.

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He was woken to early sun and a blurry head and the residue of drinking in his mouth. He pushed himself off the table, groaning.

'Ludwig.'

The only thing that could have moved him then was the note of fear in Feliciano's voice. He opened his eyes, and slowly, the world swam into focus. The look on his face was shattered, terrified, and Ludwig found his hand and held it tight to stop either of them from falling apart.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'I thought you were going to die.' His voice broke and Feliciano wavered, tears shining through his lashes.

'There's no war. I promise.' Ludwig sat up, moving to push his hair back, but Feliciano caught his hands and held them, a strange sob working through his throat. Ludwig eased him closer until Feliciano was crumpled against his chest, low wracking noises shuddering through him. He didn't know how to fix this, and the helplessness felt even worse than the tanks had been. 'I promise.'

'Ludwig,' he said again, eyes shining, face twisting. Ludwig had to look away or he'd kiss him.

'We'll be safe.'

Feliciano made a half-laugh, fingertips drawing tiny circles in his messy hair. 'Do you think I'm foolish for hoping that the world can get better?' he asked. His throat went thick.

'I think you're brave.'

'Even if this keeps happening?' He looked up, a blank shine to his eyes.

'I told you.' Ludwig held him tighter, trying to bring him back. 'Some day, all of this will be better. I'll make it better,' he promised recklessly, and it was worth it because Feliciano blinked and his expression folded like he knew just how mad it was to promise that.

'You're willing to do that?'

Ludwig would tear down the Wall for him, so he held their gaze.

'Anything. And...and if my country is not healed for another twenty, thirty, forty years, I can wait. But please, for now, let me tell this to you.' He cupped his face, taking in the fine lines of his eyelashes. 'I love you.'

Feliciano shook his head and smiled like sunrise, hopeful and breaking and wondering. The world continued, and they still stood here.

'You make me hope, Feliciano,' he finished. Even when he shouldn't, even if hoping and love was a death sentence. Feliciano leaned up and kissed him, slow and warm.

'I love you, too.'

Ludwig couldn't remember how to speak properly for a few seconds afterwards, and when he did, it was a mumble. 'I think I taste like alcohol.'

He smiled. 'I don't mind.'

## Chapter End Notes

The tanks mentioned are part of the Berlin Crisis of 1961.

:: Old fabric stores with warped-glass windows



# Chapter Six

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They would want him back at base soon. He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't have agreed to a painting job with a trusting artist that terrible night. He shouldn't be in *love*, god damn it all, shouldn't still be thinking of his big brother. He pulled away buried his head in his hands and tried to force breath through the heavy weight knotted around his chest. He didn't want to go back.

'Ludwig?' A soft touch against his uniform collar. Ludwig shifted away, wrapping arms tighter around himself, and Feliciano hesitated before sitting across from him, hands and eyes wide open. 'It's over, Ludwig. You're safe now.'

He couldn't explain it if he tried, how it was never over in his head, how he was so scared of the sound of the bombers. Nuclear war hovered at their fingertips and he could have been there. It was over, until tonight, and he'd live it all again.

'You should have left the city,' he muttered.

'Don't be silly.' Feliciano shifted, and wiped at his own eyes. 'It's just...it's life now.'

He hated that. He wanted to make a life for him where things were safe and away from this, but the world never moved away from things like this and never will, not until something better at killing is designed. 'It shouldn't be.'

'Oh, Ludwig.' Feliciano had a way of looking at him that made him feel young-bird gawky and aware and needing to kiss him. 'It's okay.'

This time, when their hands were close, Ludwig curled them together. He couldn't explain how he'd wanted to give him the whole world since he smiled. He tugged him closer until Feliciano sat beside him again, brushing a kiss over his knuckles. 'I don't want to go back yet.' He never wanted to, but he didn't know who he was without the uniform on.

'Is something wrong?'

The whole fucking *world* was wrong and Ludwig was blind enough not to know until Gilbert threw him out screaming about how he was a disgrace. It was his fault. He shook his head, but Feliciano threaded a hand in his hair and made him look. 'What happened at the border?'

*I am scared of nuclear war and I am scared of my brother and I love you far too much.* 'It's not important.'

'Ludwig.' Feliciano's eyes nearly glowed in the lamplight. They saw him, raw with emotion when Ludwig couldn't hide it, wouldn't hide it, and all he could think of was what Feliciano would think of him after. He was tired. 'You are so important to me.'

*I shouldn't be* was the first thing he thought. If he was brave enough to look into those trusting eyes and say no, ever, he would have told him *give your heart to someone who's worth your beauty*. But he was a coward and kept his mouth shut, let Feliciano kiss his forehead and turns to him, reaching for the sun, and breaks again.

'I think I would have done it,' he whispered against his mouth. 'If they'd told me to start a war.'

'You didn't.' Another kiss to his neck. 'You're brave, you know.'

He wasn't brave, he'd never been. Not when his dreams still raged with the sirens and Gilbert curled around him in the bunker, praying for the war to end. He struggled out of his memories.

'Feliciano, I'm *not*-'

Feliciano quieted him with a kiss that left him fuzzy-headed for a moment, trying to remember how to speak.

'It is not your fault,' he said with such command that Ludwig almost believed him for a moment. 'You are still you, no matter the uniform, and I know you. You are brave, and just, and you love painfully and deeply. I would know you even if everything else in the world fell to ashes.'

Before he could argue, Feliciano's fingers curled through his hair, pressed at the back of his head, and with a shaky breath, he leaned down.

'I was scared,' he confessed in the quiet dark between their breaths. 'Of nuclear war. Of dying there.'

The hands stopped, and Feliciano's mouth contorted in an odd, questioning shape. It made Ludwig want to kiss it again. He held the urge down. His eyes were glimmering in the gentle light. 'It's okay to be scared of *war*, Ludwig.'

His head was still running ten steps behind, fixed at his mouth. Gilbert's eyes flashed through his head again, always tied to the need to become something better.

But that was a different time and Ludwig wanted to believe him, wanted to become everything he wanted, to be better for him. If the Wall would change him, this was better than anything else, and so- he nodded. Feliciano smiled, relieved, and Ludwig finally gave in and kissed him again. Feliciano gripped at his collar and pulled it off alignment. He didn't want to fix it yet.

'I should go.'

'I guess.' Feliciano lingered by the collar, fingertips ghosting over his neck and jaw, making patterns of heat. He wasn't fixing it, just admiring it- admiring him, Ludwig supposed, even though it felt strange to think of it. He was exhausted, but the hints of heat woke him up. His

skin felt charged, and Feliciano's eyelashes were long against his tanned skin. He glanced up and Ludwig jerked his gaze away, embarrassed. He didn't want to leave at all.

'I need to...' He trailed off, unsure if he could keep himself from saying *kiss you again*.

'I know.' His tie was looser, showing a flash of tanned collarbone, and Ludwig stared at his own hands, holding himself still. He didn't notice Feliciano getting closer until his mouth was against his neck and his body *shot* through with heat, making him groan.

Feliciano froze, body balanced over his, barely inches apart. Ludwig let his head fall back against the chair, eyes closed. Feliciano was still for a moment before the warmth drew away and he kissed his throat and he gasped, choked.

'Tonight.' His voice shook, heavy with questioning want. 'If you- if you're free. You know where I am.'

'I will,' Ludwig promised, reckless for him. Everything about this was nothing he'd ever done before but it felt so right, so perfect, that it was like he'd already loved him forever.

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Feliciano was listening to the record again and flipping through the poetry book just to read the notes when the knock on the door came. He jolted up and raced to pull it open, gazing up, mouth dry.

'You look good,' he said without thinking. Ludwig looked startled, a hand automatically going to the buttons of his dress shirt. He looked better without the severe uniform, the lines around his eyes not quite as deep.

'You too,' he said, dipping his head.

In some ways, it was the same as the first time. Ludwig still had a sharp awareness around him as he glanced around the small room, but now Feliciano could read the shifts of mood in his face, the delight he couldn't veil when he saw the poetry book laying nearby. There was still the heat between them, but this time Feliciano could hold his gaze and get closer. He swallowed around the dryness in his throat.

'Are you staying tonight?'

'Do you want me to?' Ludwig asked instead. There was a curious gleam in his blue eyes, and Feliciano had the sudden, ridiculous notion that he could ask anything and Ludwig would give it. He wanted *him*, simply, even though the world was kept on tenterhooks for the spark of war outside. For tonight, this was theirs- *they* were their own, allowed to love and be in love like never before.

'Yes.'

A real, delighted smile. He glowed, looking nothing like the stern officer he'd appeared to be. As they walked, Feliciano could feel his heavy presence against his back.

'I don't have a second bed,' he said, letting the heat slip into his own smile.

'I'm sure we'll manage.' A hand brushed down his spine, sparking with contact, but they didn't touch more until they were inside the safety of the bedroom. Then, Ludwig eased him back against the door and fit their mouths together, slow and promising. Feliciano wanted to touch him, and be touched, and have this night be a little piece of forever.

Ludwig sat down cautiously on the bed, tension stiffening his shoulders back in perfect form. Feliciano sat closer and placed his hands on his shoulders, gazing into cornflower eyes.

'Do you want it?' His voice tipped on the edge of breaking.

'Feliciano, I have- oh, God, I think I've always wanted you.' His eyes were glassy and overbright, and he tipped his head like he'd learned it from birds. 'Does that scare you?'

It sent a hot rush down through his fingertips, and he shook his head. 'You're not intimidating when you're not in your fancy uniform, remember?'

'Well, I should have brought it if you like it so much,' Ludwig shot back, with a teasing flick of canine teeth. Feliciano meant to reply, but all he could really think of for a moment was that when Ludwig shifted back, the muscles in his shoulders strained against the fabric. The teasing drained from his face, and with a jerky motion, he reached out before he abruptly pulled back.

'You can touch, Ludwig,' Feliciano said softly. He began unbuttoning his shirt. His hands were still fisted in the blankets, the tendons standing out in his forearms.

'I want to,' he rushed out. 'I want to, but...'

'You've never been allowed before?' Feliciano broke away from the buttons to card a hand through his hair. Ludwig leaned into the touch like it was as vital as oxygen, eyes wide. He hurt for that, the look that meant they both knew what the world was like. They held the gaze for a moment until Ludwig carefully moved back and slid the shirt off in a smooth motion and folded it carefully. Feliciano wanted to paint how the light reflected across his skin, and he wanted to touch like a deep-set hunger that had always been there, but now was roaring. Artists, Francis had once said, were always starving for beauty, and Feliciano drank the sight of him in, sated.

Ludwig finally looked back and he couldn't pretend he was doing differently in time.

'You're the most beautiful person I've seen.' He swallowed hard, trying to think again. 'Did you know that?'

Shock flashed in his eyes. 'I don't- nobody's ever told me that before.'

'They should have. I will. You're beautiful, Ludwig.'

'You should be saying that to yourself,' he muttered, cheeks flushing pink. Feliciano was about to argue, but Ludwig turned to put the shirt on the bedside table and he saw black inked lines on his shoulder blade.

'You have a tattoo?'

Ludwig hesitated before carefully putting down the folded shirt. 'I got it years ago. When I was younger and more prone to...following my brother.' He rubbed it, like it stung.

'Can I touch it?'

His piercing gaze searched his face for a long time, bewildered, as if wondering why he'd want to. 'Anything you want.'

Feliciano knelt behind him and finally saw the broad expanse of scars and muscle there, and the elegant lines of feather and eye.

'Oh,' he said, voice trembling, tracing the lines. Ludwig was stiff under his touch, teeth dug into his lip, staring at the wall. The muscles of his back shifted slightly as he adjusted, and Feliciano pressed flat palms down beneath the ink. He took a sharp breath, shoulders curling in, and a bright blue eye caught him for half a second before he closed them tightly.

'Feliciano,' he said, nearly begging. His chest was heaving slightly. Feliciano silently edged closer and pressed his palm over his heart, and Ludwig outright gasped for him.

'It's a cuckoo,' he said. Ludwig's eyes were still closed, but a flicker of a smile ghosted across his face for a second before it was gone. He could feel his pulse fluttering under warm skin.

'Do you know what *Kuckuckskind* means, Feliciano?'

'No.'

'Cuckoo child.' He was gasping more now, and one of his broad hands found Feliciano's hip, thumb rubbing circles over the bone there to steady them both. 'It refers to- well, to put it plainly, it means an illegitimate child. A bastard child.' That half-crooked smile again, and Ludwig leaned in, close enough for Feliciano to see the tension in every movement, close enough to shrug away his own shirt and let them have nothing but themselves, skin on skin in the gold heat, close enough to hear the bitten-back groan Ludwig made, muffled against his collarbone.

'Is that you?'

'Only Gilbert knows.' His head rested on his shoulder, and he trembled, his pulse still going like a bird's heart. 'And my mother, I suppose, but she never told us who it was. I know enough.'

Feliciano could see the inky curl behind his shoulder of the outstretched wing, and with a final, soft noise, Ludwig's tension went slack. 'I know it was a soldier.'

'Which side?' The question slipped out before he could stop it. Ludwig just shook his head, pain flicking across the cut of his brow.

'It doesn't matter anymore.' His eyes finally opened, clearer, like the steel of them was gone. 'I don't want to see another war.'

'There won't be.'

He looked bewildered and adoring, like the night they'd met, the hopeful spark lighting in his expression even as he tried to hide it. 'You can't- you can't *promise* things like that, Feliciano.'

'Well, I did.'

His mouth, and the way the corner quirked- Feliciano had thought and dreamed of it, had wanted to paint the shadow and blood blush. He looked like he would refute it, mind flipping through different responses until the worry lines suddenly unfolded and he laughed.

'I love you,' he said simply. 'For all your believing. You make me believe, too. I told you, didn't I?'

'Tell me again,' Feliciano said. 'In the future, when everything is a little brighter, and I'll tell you new things to believe in. After all, I am one of the avant-garde. We bring forth the new.'

'Tell me some of them now.' Calloused hands slid around his hips and drew him closer, buzzing with energy.

'Art. Being remembered.' He cupped his face, shivering with heat. 'Falling in love.'

'That one, I know.' Their bare thighs and knees were sliding together, and Feliciano was gasping against his broad chest, everything the soft gold glow of lamplight. 'Even if others don't. I wonder-' A half-choked groan. 'What about our love is so undefinable to them that they want to hide it?'

'They're always, always just people. Scared people. Do they fear people who live for others, or for music or paint on canvases or for all the other beautiful things in the world? Do they fear people who love like us, fearlessly?'

'Fearlessly.' Ludwig kissed his chest and pressed him down in the sheets, kissed him through the sparking ache of stretching and the liquid warmth in his veins and the shuddering goodness. His hair was coming undone, spiking out in the front, and Feliciano slid his hands in and tugged, held him close and said his name over and over like praying.

'Ti amo, Ludwig, love you,' he begged, and Ludwig's voice was all broken-up and worshipful along with his, *ich liebe dich, Feliciano, lieblich, sweetheart*. When they were together, all he could do was hold on and feel every part of them together, shaking down to stardust.

'I thought I'd be scared of falling in love,' Ludwig murmured. Feliciano met him in a kiss, the world blurring through overwhelmed tears, wanting to be closer still. He loved him, completely, this officer with the blue eyes and the past stuck halfway in the East, Ludwig Beilschmidt with so much bravery inside of him and so much love still left in the face of war.

He smiled at him like he held the world and Feliciano held him tighter, his name in his mouth and throat and skin as he tipped off the edge. He promised he'd give himself for a future where Ludwig could always smile that way. *Avant-garde*, bring in the new age. A fighter, in his own way, for this man who would try to heal his country's heart with his own hands.

'I'm not scared anymore.'

## Chapter End Notes

Ludwig's father was Russian.

:: Guitar from someone's backyard

# Chapter Seven

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ludwig let himself smile as he traced patterns on the wood grain. His heart still felt like it was fluttering too fast even days afterwards, head still caught in the light and heat, and God, how he'd said his *name*-

He shook himself out of it and took a drink, hoping it hid his expression. He could feel a hot blush working up from his collar and it only reminded him of the mark tingling on the junction of his shoulder. He shivered.

Berlin was a city of history and art, and Gilbert had taught him to love it like a second heart. Ludwig knew Berlin, knew its nightlife and secrets and blood, and he'd give it to Feliciano if he asked. The late trains here felt like gateways and just like he'd fallen for the city, he fell in love with a man who talked too much and smiled just right, a man with beautiful golden eyes whose name was Feliciano Vargas.

Someone thumped down in the seat across from him at the small table, followed by the scrape of another chair being dragged up. Ludwig dropped his glass and rested a hand over his gun, wary.

'You're the officer? Ludwig Beilschmidt?' the man demanded. He looked like he'd been in a street fight recently.

'I am. Why?'

'You have the later shift on Sundays?'

'Yes,' Ludwig said. He eyed the man and his companion, noting their British uniforms. 'If the British sector has an issue, procedure is to speak directly to the Bundesgrenzschutz, not to go after any officer you see on the street.'

'Trust me, you don't want either of our commands to find out what we're doing.' He raked a hand through his hair, exposing the dark circles under his eyes. Ludwig couldn't tell if they were from bruises or sleeplessness. 'I'm Jett. This is Kiwi. We need your help.'

Ludwig didn't like the implications of these soldiers, but ignoring West military never ended well. He rose, paid, and followed them out.

'What do you need?'

'We can't talk here,' Kiwi said. They ducked into a side street, whispering to each other. Ludwig kept his hand on his pistol holster until they finally found themselves in a small green space. Jett slowed to a stop and faced him.



'How did you find me?' Ludwig asked sharply. 'Do you normally go out asking for specific officers?'

'We're military,' he said, like it explained everything. Perhaps it did. 'We heard you were usually at a certain bar, and besides, you matched the description.' He cast a look at him, just on the appropriate side of appreciative. Ludwig glanced at his friend, Kiwi, and wondered if this particular Berlin branch of the military attracted people like that or if it was just him.

'Why do you need me?' Ludwig repeated.

'There was a pretty distinctive car that went through the checkpoint while you were on. A blue '55 Thunderbird.' He pulled a photograph out of his breast pocket and handed it over. It was a young soldier captured in the moment of half-tumbling from his car, grinning. Ludwig recognized the vehicle immediately, and then the soldier a moment after.

'I know that man.'

'Everyone does. That's Jones.'

'Alfred Jones?' Ludwig held the photo out, but Jett shook his head.

'Keep it for now. I shouldn't have any photos with other men in it anymore.' He shared a look with Kiwi, and both smiled. Ludwig supposed he had been right, and that he wasn't an exception.

'I saw the car going into the East.'

'With both of them?' Jett asked sharply.

'Both.'

They both nodded. 'Jones got reported by some men. He's with Kirkland, the other one you saw. Green eyes, light hair.'

Ludwig knew Arthur well enough, but he was still cautious. 'With?'

Kiwi sighed. 'Officer Beilschmidt, don't act like you don't know.' He jerked his head at his hands. 'It's an artist, isn't it?'

Ludwig tucked his hands behind his back, aware that his face was reddening. The paint was hard to get out of his gloves, and it didn't help that Feliciano was always *covered* in it, and that he couldn't help himself from touching him. He cleared his throat.

'Alfred, or Jones, whatever you call him. He's been reported for...that sort?'

'There'll be a trial soon. We talked with Kirkland already,' Jett said. 'You need to be a witness at the trial.'

He swallowed back a slight sickness. 'You want me to lie?'

'I want you to save someone.' Jett looked tired, his secret amusement with Kiwi gone. 'Arthur was going on leave anyways. He's already...he knows what will happen.'

'Save Alfred?' Ludwig confirmed quietly.

'You never saw him with Arthur,' Kiwi agreed. They couldn't meet each other's eyes. 'Arthur's under suspicion already, and nobody wants to lose Alfred.' He swallowed. 'Bloody great pilot.'

They stood in silence for a moment. All Ludwig could think of was Alfred's bright naivety and what he would do if Feliciano was in danger like this. He'd do anything for him if this happened. They'd been *allowed* a different world that night, but the world wasn't like that. Not yet.

'You'll do it?' Jett asked. There was no question, not really. Ludwig stared at the ground and nodded, sharply, as if accepting orders.

'Good man.'

He waited until they'd left to make his way back to the art gallery, to the back of the studios. He stared at the shining blue car, backlit by the splatters of multicolour paint.

'Ludwig?'

He shook himself out of it and turned to face Feliciano. It felt better just being near him, God, he'd pay the world for a second with him. He opened his arms and Feliciano ran to embrace him, kissing his neck, their bodies fitting together perfectly. He closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of paint and sun, of warmth.

'What's wrong, *mio caro*?' he asked when they let go and sat down in the chairs.

He warmed at the nickname, but not for long. 'Do you remember Alfred?'

'What happened to him?'

'Nothing. Not yet.' He ran a hand through his hair, momentarily distracted by the mess of curls. 'He's been reported for being...homosexual.'

Feliciano tucked himself closer. Ludwig understood. He wanted to hide from the weight of the word and the implications some days.

'I have nightmares about that,' he said. Ludwig held him tighter.

'I'm going to be a witness at his trial. I have to lie.'

'To save him?'

It didn't feel like saving anyone. 'I have to pretend that Alfred isn't at fault.'

'That's good.'

'It's not,' he said. The words tumbled out messy and hesitating. 'If it was *good* nobody would be jailed for this. Nobody would have to hide. This is still an *innocent man*, nothing is good.'

'I know,' he said. Ludwig laid his hands on the table and let Feliciano trace the lines in the palms. 'I know you hate it. You're a good person, an honourable person-'

He scoffed and Feliciano's eyes flashed.

'Listen to me, Ludwig. You're good. Who told you that you weren't?'

*Disgrace of a brother, I won't have you in the house-*

'Do you ever think,' he rushed out, desperate to leave the words behind, '-about how mad we are to be in love in this kind of world?'

'All the time.' Feliciano's eyelashes shimmered with tears. He kissed his forehead, holding him together, holding him there, the only grounding part in a world full of teeth and being torn apart. 'Look at me. Just look at me, focus on me,' Feliciano crooned. 'The world is terrible and beautiful, Ludwig, and there is nothing we can do to change it from it's ways. We have to live, that's all we can do for now.'

'No. You will.' Ludwig leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Feliciano's temple, soft and almost trembling. 'I know you will. With your art. You have to.'

He blinked at him, and tears slipped down his face.

'You're good,' he said. 'Ludwig. My beautiful Ludwig, you've done so well already.'

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Nobody argued with him when he announced he was leaving for a day assignment with the American military. For the first time in months, he loaded his Luger. It felt odd with the excess weight as he picked up the altered crossing records.

The commander walked with the air of a man used to power. He looked over Ludwig when he came in, critically examining his uniform and posture.

'You're the witness called in, officer?'

'Yes, sir.'

He pressed his lips together and nodded. 'Can you gather a few of your men as a guard?'

'Is the pilot dangerous?'

The man laughed in surprise.

'Dangerous? God, no. This is just a misunderstanding.' His dark eyes went flinty and hard. 'Nevertheless.'

Ludwig picked out a few of the guards and instructed the rest to run the checkpoint normally. His head already hurt.

'Excellent,' the commander said once they returned. They followed him back to the American base and to where the shining silver bombers rested. A figure swaying in a familiar jacket stood by one of them. When they took him, he was more cooperative than he had expected, even if every line on his body was rigid with fury. He caught Ludwig's eye and the anger vanished for a second in the face of his surprise and confusion.

Ludwig realized suddenly that he *didn't know*, and the sick weight in his stomach pressed up against his throat. It wasn't his fault, it wasn't *fair*, but what did it matter? Alfred went the rest of the way silently. They didn't look at each other.

The interview was nerve-wracking. Alfred was so obvious with his love, wearing it all across his skin in every movement. Ludwig had to hope he wasn't too proud to be able to be saved. Only one moment stood out to him in the haze- the threat of the man and the despair and pain in his expression when he agreed. *Yes, sir*.

'Your men can go,' the man said as they rode to go the courtroom. Alfred's panicked eyes flicked from Ludwig to his commander. Ludwig motioned to his men and instructed them to go back. He only met Alfred's gaze by accident as the man said, 'You and the witness can wait here.'

He went into the room and locked the door, leaving them in the echoing hallway. A guard stood at the end, and tilted his head at them. It was Kiwi.

'Ludwig,' Alfred said brokenly. His young face looked hollow and haunted. 'Ludwig, what are you-'

'Listen to me,' Ludwig snapped, locking his emotions back, straightening his shoulders, *perfect soldier* just like Gilbert had taught him, the only goddamn thing of worth he'd ever known and only for this honourless act. 'You never went to the East with Arthur. You don't *know* him like you do.'

'But-'

'Don't argue with me, Jones.' He made his voice cold and commanding.

'They'll throw him in jail.' He was shaking, eyes wild. When he straightened up, he was only a little shorter, only a little younger, and yet they were worlds apart. 'They're going to- they'll court-martial *my Arthur*.'

'Unless you want to be jailed with him, you won't act stupid.' Ludwig hurt for him. He was being cruel, but only as cruel as the world would be. He stepped back, hating himself.

'I do,' Alfred breathed. His eyes shimmered with tears. 'I love him.'

'I know you do. Believe me.' He could think only of Feliciano, and all the other beautiful things he could lose. 'I'm sorry.'

Alfred stared at the ground, hand working in a pocket. His eyes were empty and haunted.

'I love him,' he repeated. Almost mechanically, as if ordered, he wiped off his face and breathed out, the emotion clearing. He didn't look at Ludwig again as the door opened and they walked through.

Feeling sick, he took his place where the witnesses stood. Across the small room, Arthur sat, head held high, insolently calm. The way Alfred *looked* at him, desperate and hungry for the slightest hint of connection, made Ludwig stare at the judge's table instead. If he was here, he'd look at Feliciano that way.

The buzz in his head was loud, scraping against his guilty thoughts, *your fault, your fault*, until the witness was called. Ludwig stood, careful of his posture, and did not look at Alfred. He couldn't bear to see the rightful accusation there.

'I was the officer on duty during that night. I recorded the Thunderbird entering the East at eight-forty and leaving at eleven. Both times, only the British soldier, Kirkland, was in the car.'

He stood, buzzing and blind and suspended in heartbeats until the order came for release. The gavel slammed. Guilty, guilty, always.

He caught Arthur's gaze for a heartbeat and saw pure relief and gratefulness. He felt worse, so much worse.

His pulse beat against his skull. He got up and left, pushing through the throng of people. Only when he was outside did he tear off his too-tight jacket, desperate to breathe, and start running.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Fearing and wanting to know what the future will look like

# Chapter Eight

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gilbert had taught him how to shoot a gun and win a fight and survive in a city full of sharp love. He'd taught him this, too, drinking, but only by accident. It didn't matter. Ludwig had always been good at following his older brother, especially when he shouldn't have. It was the only thing he was good at.

He leaned against the rough brick wall outside a bar and tucked the cold bottle against his neck, the chill seeping through his bones, like lightning, like Feliciano's touch without any of the warmth and goodness. The stars looked like a silvery paintbrush smear against the night, and he blinked up at them. Even with his jacket off and draped around his shoulders, people shied back from his uniform like he was a weapon, and it felt right. Not good, never good, but *right*, because if he was his country's weapon he could stop caring or thinking about wrong and right and trials full of cruel laws. With a loaded Luger and an order in his head he might be able to stop thinking of how Feliciano looked at him like he was so much *more*.

He'd rather be Feliciano's than his country's or his brother's, and the very thought sent more chills through him and a prickling newness. He had to remind himself that he could think of that. Standing there in the neon and dark of downtown Berlin, watching the glitter and guilty, glowing pleasure, it felt hard to be anything but an echoing radio conduit tuned in to one artist.

It was a lot more than he'd ever deserved, Gilbert Beilschmidt's baby brother with a fear of nuclear wars and a love for cities with paint on their walls, his mother's soldier-son *Kuckuckskind*.

His head was still spinning. He wanted to see Feliciano again, but not like this. He shouldn't have to see him with all his spilling frustrations and hopeless thoughts. He'd see him later, when he'd had enough drinks to make himself forget about the trial and war for another few weeks at least.

He tilted his head back, the rough-hewn edges of mortar digging into his cheek. He'd unloaded his gun again, and it was a comforting weight in his belt. He'd stay here in the night and streetlights for just a little longer. Feliciano would look beautiful in the technicolour lights of the dance floors, and even better under the starlight. He'd looked best in the gold lamplight of their night together. Maybe once his head cleared he'd be able to show him all of it again. Berlin was beautiful in a way, volatile and always in the making of itself, and Feliciano had said something about that, *avant-garde*. It sounded like an artist's city when he said that, and Ludwig would let it be, if Feliciano wanted it. He'd give him anything.

He let himself smile. Somewhere in the tuning fork of his heart, there was humming hopefulness for a future where everything was better.

The city was buzzing with rumours about the trial. At least, it felt that way to Feliciano. Mourning and whispers and *fear* that they'd be next.

He didn't wander around after dark that night, seeing the glimmering city. There were too many people talking behind hushed hands and the slur of alcohol. He stayed in his rooms instead, painting and listening to his favourite Elvis song. He wished he could hear Ludwig sing it.

*'As long as I have you...'*

He missed Ludwig, and he was scared for him, for *them*, and he loved him so much. Lovino had always told him he loved too openly, and Feliciano would never forgive himself if it ended up with them on trial. Possibly not even a trial, because they weren't important enough to do anything but erase. A bullet, maybe.

At the thought, Feliciano left his unfinished painting and went to go curl up on the couch and watch the record spin, hopelessly cold. He understood what Ludwig had said about how this wasn't *good*, but in the end, they could only try to live in the spaces where they could.

Ludwig. His proud, brilliant Ludwig, who saw this and thought he could tear a system apart with nothing but his bare hands. He likely *could*, Feliciano thought, but it'd kill him and he'd think nothing of it. He hated it, hated whoever had made him think he was nothing. He was kinder than he thought he was and had the brightest blue eyes and touched him like it was worship, and his smile and *laugh* made Feliciano go breathless. He was so, so much more than an officer.

He sighed to himself, and looked towards his first painting of Ludwig. He'd brought it back from the art gallery. There was no way he would ever be able to sell it, Ludwig with that cautious, wonderful look, glowing with promise.

The door rattled, and Feliciano stood up, a weight lifting off his shoulders.

'Ludwig?' he asked, lowering the well-worn poetry book. There was a dread-filled pause with no answer before the lock clicked open, and he only had time to step back once before the guards with rough, poorly made fake Bundesgrenzschutz uniforms had slipped inside, the soft light glinting off their guns. Feliciano dropped the book and fumbled for something, anything to defend himself. Why had they come for him?

'What are you doing here?' he demanded. His voice shook.

'This is him?' one of the guards growled. They eyed him with flickers of interest. They had different accents. East Berlin accents.

Feliciano grabbed the iron from his fireplace and brandished it, readying into a fencing stance. His breathing was harsh enough to scrape up his throat, and the lights made glaring halos. *He'd never see Ludwig again.*

'Get out of here,' he ordered, but it sounded weak even to him. One of the guards raised his gun, almost lazily, and flicked off the safety. Feliciano froze, terror rushing back at the sight

of the dark muzzle. This time, Ludwig wasn't here. This time, they would kill him.

'Put that down, you could hurt someone,' he said. His voice was almost bored, but his eyes gleamed as if it was a game.

'What if I don't?' Feliciano asked. His mouth tasted metallic with fear.

'I'll shoot you,' the man said. He stepped forward and pushed the poker down, tapping the gun against his solar plexus. Feliciano didn't move. He couldn't. 'I won't kill you, but I will make it hurt so much you'll wish it did.'

'No,' Feliciano protested, mouth dry. He wanted to fight, but he didn't doubt they'd hurt him and *enjoy* it.

'You can come quietly, or we'll club you with a rifle and bring you in,' one of them said lazily. He glanced around the room, noting the pictures on the walls, and nudged a canvas with his boot. 'God, you artist types are hopeless. Fucking Wessis, life on this side must make them soft.'

'Hey, check this out,' one sneered. Feliciano went cold, twisting around to see where the third had gone. He was examining the painting, the one he'd made of Ludwig. 'Isn't this one of the officers?'

'Don't touch that,' Feliciano snarled, shocked at himself and how cold and hard his voice had gone. The guard looked up, grey eyes glimmering.

'Oh, I get it now,' he hissed. 'You're one of *those* types, aren't you? The kind who ran off to Berlin since the army wouldn't let him in? They figured out you're a-' He made a rough motion with his hands and the other two chuckled darkly.

'I'm not,' Feliciano spat again, stomach twisting into a cold knot of dread.

'So he's your lover?' the guard asked, and for a second Feliciano wondered why the word *lover* could sound so much like a weapon. 'Or do you just want him to be?'

'We're just friends,' he said. It sounded hopeless and he knew it was.

'Tell you what, *Feliciano Vargas*. You come with us without putting up a fight, and we won't tell anyone about what your officer does.' He considered Ludwig's portrait a final time, mouth twitching towards a mocking smile, and tapped the gun under Feliciano's chin. 'He wouldn't want that, would he? I've heard you can get five years for it.'

That was what made him stop fighting. He wouldn't hurt Ludwig. Feliciano loved him, and if he had to take this, he would.

'How do you know my name?' he asked quietly. The first guard laughed.

'We know your *brother*. Lovino decided the Stasi was too good for him.'



Everything in the East was cold, grey concrete, devoid of colour and art. Feliciano stared at the wall of his holding cell and tried to think of anything. His brother had been an informant for the Stasi. His brother had been a *traitor*, until he'd stopped, and they'd taken Feliciano to punish him. That was all the guards had told him.

Feliciano thought of Ludwig. What would he think, when he found the empty flat? Would he know what had happened? Would he think Feliciano had abandoned him? The thought of how he'd let himself be led through an unguarded part of the border without a fight still made him sick.

Most of all, he still missed Ludwig, and alone in the East, the yawning distance between them made him feel like he was cracking apart inside.

The cell door creaked open. Feliciano stood up mechanically, cold and empty, and followed the instructions to a brightly lit grey room. They didn't usually bother restraining him, but they did today. Everyone knew he wasn't a dissident, it was only to hurt Lovino. Feliciano had heard a word for it whispered down the cold hallways- *Zersetzung*. Decomposition. It was a harsh word.

If Feliciano had to pick a favourite word from German, it was *lieblich*, like Ludwig had called him in the gold light, adoring and trembling. He didn't expect to hear that here. He didn't expect anything more than harsh cruelties from this place.

Today, they attached the manacles to the table. Instead of an officer with more pointless questions about rebellion, someone else was pushed in the room, shouting and cursing to the heavens, pulling against the hold three guards had on him, an angry red welt showing on his cheekbone where he'd been struck. His brother.

Lovino froze when he saw him, and all the fight suddenly drained out of him.

'Feliciano?' he asked. Dimly, Feliciano was aware of the guards leaving, the guttering lights in the ceiling. His brother looked older, harsher like the city, with harder eyes and hollow cheeks, but he also looked achingly familiar like nothing at all had changed. Lovino rushed to him, dark hazel eyes open and vulnerable. 'Feli? Oh my God, I didn't think they would *ever* be able to hurt you, you understand that, right? Feli, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.'

He should look happier to see him, or relieved he looked unharmed, or angry for everything, but Feliciano couldn't. He could only look at him, indescribably hurt, and think of the money he'd used to send, every month. He had been such an idiot.

Lovino's hands hesitated over his, the knuckles showing through his scarred skin. He set his hands on the table instead, and Feliciano shifted back. His head hurt so much.

'I'm sorry,' he said again, eyes shimmering.

'Why did you do it?' Feliciano heard himself ask. Lovino flinched like the words had been fists.

'For you,' he said brokenly. 'I had to. I thought the pay could make things better for you, that I could stop, but they wouldn't let me. I guess it doesn't matter anymore.' His mouth pulled up in a terrible parody of a laugh. 'Nothing does.'

Feliciano turned away from him, unable to meet his eyes any longer. It seemed impossible that so many things were so wrong now.

'It doesn't,' he said.

Eventually, they took him away again, and led Feliciano back to his cell, where he curled up and stopped dreaming. He heard his brother's staggering footprints outside through the high barred window. He hated that he was being used to hurt Lovino. He didn't want to hurt him, even if he'd done what he had. He didn't want to think of what Lovino had done, at all. He was so tired.

He hated the injustice he'd seen and the blood spilled for it. He hated the looming threat of war that made people love each other in frantic breathless pauses and only get close enough to hurt. But in the end, Berlin was a war city, and it turned people from artists to soldiers in an instant.

He was glad his brother hadn't asked if he was forgiven, because Feliciano wouldn't have been able to answer.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Stacks of old warped-paper postcards

# Chapter Nine

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Feliciano was woken by a harsh light, eyes squinted shut, his body screaming complaints of exhaustion and fear. Feliciano wrapped his arms around his knees and turned his face away, too drained to do anything else.

'What did you say he was?' a cold voice asked.

'He had a painting of this officer in his rooms when we went to get him.' The voice of one of the guards made Feliciano bury his face into his paint- and oil-stained sleeves. He rapped the bars. 'How about you tell us the name of your lover?'

'He's not my lover,' Feliciano whispered, cracking open inside. *Ludwig, I'm so sorry.*

'Tell us his name,' the other man demanded coolly.

'I don't know his name.' He didn't know why they were asking, but he knew it would end up worse if they knew who Ludwig was.

'Bullshit,' the guard sneered. He suddenly reached through the bars and grabbed Feliciano's arm. 'You'll tell us now, or we'll find a different way to get it out of you.'

Feliciano frantically tried to shove him away, but the man was strong and his eyes danced with a terrible joy. 'I don't- I don't know anything, I promise. We only met twice.'

The guard's grip tightened, pulling him against the bars. Feliciano looked up into his dark grey eyes, cold slipping down his back. The guard let go and pulled out a ring of keys and the door clicked open.

'Don't embarrass yourself by trying to run,' he advised. He grabbed Feliciano's upper arm and roughly shoved him down the hall towards a dull metal door. Feliciano closed his eyes, sick and lonely, trying to hide away from this hell of boots clicking behind them and the harsh concrete and lights. He thought of Ludwig as they questioned him, and held onto the last pieces of himself with blue eyes and a gentler smile as the Stasi stripped the rest of him away, as they tore Ludwig's name from his unwilling mouth.

He hoped that across the Wall, Ludwig would be safe, even though it was futile. He'd told them. The cold metal of his cell dug into his back and he buried himself further into his arms, unshed tears making him gasp. He wanted Ludwig, brave and honourable and gentle, who'd saved him a thousand ways and shown him a love that was worth the world. He wanted to be somewhere, anywhere else with him, but he didn't know if he could ever forgive himself.

He thought of the future they'd hesitantly spoken about, where people like them could love freely, and then closed his eyes and tried not to think at all. That happiness had never felt

further away.

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Ludwig unbuttoned his uniform jacket and folded it away, thumbing at the smears of paint on his gloves with a smile he never would have allowed before Feliciano. That was the break in his two lives, more than the Wall ever was. The day Feliciano Vargas stepped into his life and taught him painting and art and music and how to love someone so much it knocked you breathless. He'd found his place in the split city, right beside his beautiful sunlit artist.

Ludwig had first seen him on the late train going west, the night when his older brother had thrown him out, the night where Berlin, city of breaking and remaking anew, found a new line to sever itself across. A night where he was lost and alone and broken-up between East and West. Feliciano had been sitting there, staring out the window with a smile, flipping his paintbrush through his fingers.

He'd held out his hand and smiled and offered art instead of war, and with that he'd pulled Ludwig out of the grey and into a world he could learn to love again. He never had to *learn* to love Feliciano- the hardest part was learning how to hide that love from others.

Feliciano was- he tipped his head back, the cold of the officer's quarters wall soaking through his back- Feliciano was too painful to be away from and too wonderful to be with. Feliciano Vargas was *everything* to him.

He left his gun and walked out, down the streets to a flat he knew would be full of music and gold light and art, full of laughter and Feliciano.

He knocked on the door and it swung open under his touch. Ludwig walked in, ready to call out, and all his warmth vanished.

There was something terribly wrong. A thousand things made him sure of it. Everything about the space was *wrong*. It was so utterly silent and empty, completely void of Feliciano's gentle touch. A record was still under the needle. He could see the portrait of himself, with all its love and promises.

Ludwig took a hesitant step forward, and something gave under his boot. Nausea rising in his mouth, he knelt and picked up the poetry book, left still open to a page, the corner folded down. Feliciano had underlined a verse from one of the old war poets, *some day after this is all at peace-*

With shaking hands, Ludwig closed the book and tucked it into his pocket. The emptiness of the house pressed down on him, the wrongness of the silence and the dark empty space inside of him where Feliciano used to be. He was gone.

Ludwig stumbled out of the house and collapsed to his hands and knees, eyes burning, unable to breathe, a terrible keening noise clawing out of him, over and over, his ribs cracking in to the space where his heart should have been. He knew Feliciano wouldn't have left him. He had been taken, or-

He wouldn't think the word.

That night Ludwig found the places in Berlin where art had stopped existing and people gave up. The places where people stared up at him out of bloodshot eyes and the Wall loomed over them all. Ludwig drank and the poetry book in his pocket felt just the weight of his gun and a thousand times more dangerous. This was how he would have been, he thought in a hazy way, if Feliciano hadn't saved him.

He drank until the sun crested, crumpled against a wall somewhere in the harsh concrete, blood running down his face and in his teeth and down his throat, gasping to breathe again, dreaming while not asleep yet and *wishing* everything and anything could have been different. He thought *Feliciano* and *love you* in not so many words, and pressed his cheek that still tingled with the memory of kisses against the cold and wondered how, how, how his heart could love someone so much that it could simply stop working after they were gone.

He woke up still just as cold and empty with blood in the dip of his throat instead of paint. He went to the Wall to guard, because it was all he could do anymore. He drank and guarded and thought of Feliciano, an empty, swaying, stumbling existence. All too often he saw a bright splash of colour on the buildings and gold bright eyes would flash through his head again. He tried to stay away from the art and every other beautiful thing, but Berlin was still Feliciano's and everything, everything of Ludwig's was still his.

He didn't know how long it was in the grey when he was requested by a subordinate for a meeting with an East guard, through the checkpoint. They'd been asking for him. He hoped it was his brother, even though his gun was empty.

It wasn't. The man had dark grey eyes and an odd half-smile, and he held a photograph out through the checkpoint, hovering in that space between West and East.

'For Ludwig Beilschmidt,' he said. Ludwig took it by the edge without looking, tucked it into the pocket without the poetry book, and walked back to safety. He could feel the man's eyes on his back.

It wasn't until that night, sitting in a bar somewhere far away from the art gallery, that he remembered. He pulled it out and what he saw knocked all the air from his lungs. It was a photograph of a solid grey building he recognized. The prison for political dissidents.

Feliciano was alive. This had to mean that he was alive, and they'd taken him. This meant that Ludwig could save him.

He threw a handful of money on the table and raced out, head spinning, drinking in the harsh lines of this teasing hope. He knew, he knew what they wanted. And he'd give it, because it was Feliciano. Because a thousand times, Ludwig had looked at him and then at the gold inside of himself every time Feliciano laughed and decided that he loved him. Because the first time Feliciano said his name it had felt like worship, and when he'd drunk that straight from his lips it had felt like the core of love and he'd given him his heart in return.

Ludwig threw back his head and laughed, hand tight around the poetry book pressed to his thrumming heart, the blue sky of Berlin blurring above him. He kept his eyes open and tried

to remember the colour for the future. For Feliciano.

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Ludwig waited a long time for Alfred. He knew the pilot used to frequent the Cuckoo's Egg, but he had changed after Arthur was gone. He understood.

He finally found him nursing a can of beer with pinup art on the side and sat down at the table across from him. Alfred blinked awake, eyes hazy and pained.

'Come with me,' Ludwig ordered. Alfred silently followed, his former energy dull.

'What's this about?' he asked when Ludwig stopped.

'I need your help.'

Alfred's eyes narrowed, shadowed with exhaustion. 'Listen, I don't...I don't want to keep reminding myself of what happened. I remember it too often.'

'You'll be rid of me soon,' Ludwig said. 'I need to get past the checkpoint.'

Alfred's mouth fell open in shock, and then he glanced away. 'I can't do it. I can't make any more trouble or it'll be my trial next.'

'You *owe* me, Jones,' Ludwig said, sharpening his voice on the flint of anger inside. Alfred glared at him, blue eyes finally electric and awake and hurt beyond compare.

'I don't owe you *anything*. You expect me to be grateful for- for framing Arthur? For sending him away again? For ruining the best thing I've ever known?'

Ludwig met his eyes evenly. 'It's for Feliciano.'

The anger vanished, and his shoulders sagged. For a second, there was a flicker of understanding there. There was silence for a long moment, and Ludwig glanced up to the clear blue sky.

'What do you need me to do?' Alfred finally asked.

'I can't discuss with you out here. Come by at six tonight, before my shift.' Ludwig gave him his address and turned to go. At the last second, he stopped. 'Thank you, Alfred.'

'I may as well help some people,' he said, with a hint of his brash energy. He smiled, expression surprisingly soft. 'You know, I could never destroy this city, no matter what they ordered. It's got an art to it that you fall in love with.'

'That it does,' Ludwig agreed quietly.

Alfred showed up reasonably promptly. He looked around Ludwig's rooms before settling at the table.

'What happened to your artist, your- Feliciano?' he asked.

'The East has him.' He cut off Alfred's question with a raised hand. He didn't want to think about it. 'I don't know why. I do know how to save him.'

'What's your plan?' Alfred sat back, unable to disguise his anticipation.

Ludwig slid the photograph of the prison across the table to him. He felt strangely calm, one step removed from his mad idea. 'What do you know about prisoner exchanges?'

'I don't know much, I've only seen one. Spy for spy.' Alfred shot upright, eyes wide. 'Hold on, you can't be-'

'Pay attention,' Ludwig demanded, slamming his hand against the photo on the table, shocking Alfred into silence. 'You are a lieutenant. You're authorized to exchange prisoners. Feliciano Vargas is a West Berliner, so you can convince them to let him go.'

'Ludwig, I can't do this,' he pleaded, eyes glassy and wide.

'You can and you will. God help me, Jones, if you turn cowardly, I'll be handing you over the Stasi instead of me.' He looked him over, regretting the cold edge in his voice but refusing to let it slip. 'An American bomber pilot is someone they would be glad to have.'

Alfred pushed his chair back, lips pressed together in fury, jaw set.

'I'm not doing this. I mean- you risk everything to even get into the East, are you mad?'

Ludwig traced the soft edges of the poetry book in his pocket as he rose from his chair, his anger long ago solidified into determination, his devotion thrumming in every part of him, more vital than breathing.

'Everything I have done since the day we met has been for him. Do you hear me? For as long as I am able, I will do everything in my life for *him*.'

Alfred's hand dropped to the pocket over his heart, staring desperately at Ludwig. He wondered if the pilot had a memory there- a poem, a letter, a photograph of happier times.

'He's worth everything,' he said cautiously. Ludwig nodded. Alfred traced circles on the weathered dark table, searching Ludwig's face. 'Arthur is like that to me. He's everything.'

Ludwig heard himself in those words. 'Do we have an agreement, Jones?'

He nodded once, brow furrowing. Ludwig sat back down, breathing harder. Alfred tapped the photograph again.

'Ludwig, how do you know this is going to work?' He gestured at him. 'You're an officer, not a Soviet spy. They'll never buy it.'

'Of course they won't believe it. They won't want me because they think I'm a spy.' Ludwig lifted his head and allowed himself a smile, harsh and unfamiliar, remembering the way

Feliciano had tasted when they kissed, his body singing with the promise of something worthwhile. 'They'll want me because I am Gilbert Beilschmidt's baby brother.'

Alfred didn't understand, but it didn't matter. Ludwig knew Alfred understood how deeply one person's very existence could hurt or save your own, and how you would do anything for that person.

'Tomorrow,' Ludwig ordered. 'I will meet you outside your base.'

Alfred silently nodded, still gazing at him like he was trying to figure him out as he left. Ludwig thought that once the pilot saw Feliciano, he'd understand everything, even the way the universe tilted back and aligned when Feliciano smiled, even how that scared and drew Ludwig like nothing else.

Alfred might have the power of nuclear warheads at his fingertips, but Ludwig wasn't scared of that war anymore.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Scared of and hoping for the future



# Chapter Ten

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ludwig had met his artist on the late train going west, scraped raw from the silent coal-smoke house in the East. He learned, in the moments of running through the ashy grey streets and boarding the nearest train taking him *anywhere but here*, or so he'd gasped, learned to keep the hardness in his eyes and look in the mirror to see a stranger staring back.

Feliciano had paint smeared around the cracks in his armor everyone here wore, and in his smile and the light in his eyes was someone who was not a stranger.

Ludwig knew him, his art and beauty all in some wonderful way, and falling for him was as simple as breathing and felt like the world slipping back into place after it had been spinning wrong for years. Feliciano was his, and a thousand times more familiar than the thing he became in uniform. The soldier of the nuclear bombs, the obedient worker of the next war.

The train had rattled across the bomb-damaged rails and he had stared at his hands made for breaking things like hearts and families. Gilbert's hands. Feliciano was vibrant colour in the grey train car, the brightest thing in the dark world, and Ludwig barely dared to breathe around him, because he was nothing but a soldier. Ludwig loved Feliciano so much it scared him and saved him.

Feliciano had left green and blue streaks across the side of his neck and metallic gold under his eyes, his handprints all across his ribs and heart, marks that faded slowly and made him something beautifully full of colour. Kissing soldiers wasn't wise in any country, but especially not this one.

But Ludwig wasn't a soldier, not anymore. He was his, his, ever since he was saved that night. Ludwig was saved by him and he would finally, finally be able to return the favour.

He picked up the forged papers, admiring his own handiwork, and walked to the American base. West Berlin shone with art, and Ludwig drank it in for the last time. Gilbert had taught him to love the city, and he did, its art and war and fearless breaking pride. It shone different when he knew he would be seeing it for the last time.

Gilbert had taught him that sacrifice was the only love, the only worth that a soldier could have, and in the end he had turned out to be right.

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Alfred was waiting for him, staring at the sky. Ludwig handed him the papers, and he stared down at them, face blank with faraway panic.

'I'm glad to see you, Jones,' he said. Alfred dipped his head in response, eyes glassy. 'You should introduce me as Gilbert Beilschmidt's brother,' Ludwig continued. 'Order them to

bring out Feliciano, and as soon as he is with you, leave me.'

'Gilbert,' he repeated, eyes fluttering. 'He's why this will work?'

'Yes, I suppose.' Ludwig nearly smiled at the irony. 'What they wouldn't give for me. The only thing that will really hurt Gilbert anymore. And you'll be giving me to them, all without a fight.'

'Doesn't that scare you?' Alfred asked. Ludwig shook his head. He wasn't scared of anything but Gilbert anymore, but he couldn't give a damn if what the East would do to him would hurt his brother.

'Either Gilbert will behave or he won't. Either way, they will probably shoot me in front of him.' He glanced over to the pilot with his loss and love written all across him, and then away again, baring his teeth towards the sun, blood burning. 'I should have shot him when I had the chance.'

'When was that?'

Ludwig laughed, the sound catching on his love, slipping a hand across his empty gun. 'The night he threw me out.'

'You're devoted to Feliciano,' Alfred said. His hand traced across the edge of a photograph over the edge of his pocket. 'I...I guess I understand that. Understand you.'

'He is everything to me,' Ludwig confirmed. He had to look away, towards the East. He'd promised Gilbert he'd never return there, but it seemed he was breaking a lot of promises to his older brother lately.

'I understand,' Alfred repeated. 'I just wish it wasn't like this, this war.'

Ludwig looked at him, this boy with wings and music and poetry across his heart, who was everything he should have feared but didn't. He could imagine Feliciano as a streak of gold winding through the buildings, pulling Ludwig closer, closer to him.

'It'll all be better one day,' he said. 'We'll have a better world. Feliciano...Feliciano promised me that.'

They walked to the checkpoint together. Ludwig kept his eyes on the sign, *You are now leaving the American sector*, until it was gone behind him.

'Jones,' Ludwig said, and then stopped. 'Alfred. I want you to give something to Feliciano. Please.'

He nodded. Ludwig took out the poetry book. It lay in his paint-stained gloves, battered and fraying and filled with handwritten notes. Ludwig had written his own. He knew Feliciano would find it. He would know it was the only way he could say goodbye.

Alfred accepted it and slid it carefully into his pocket. Ludwig relaxed. He was free, open, a blank and perfect soldier. He stepped forward, and Alfred grabbed his shoulder once, a

desperate, helpless gesture.

'I'll make sure he's safe,' he said. 'Feliciano. I promise. As long as I can.'

It was more than he could have asked for. Ludwig nodded, silently thanking him.

Alfred gripped his upper arm and led him through, the wings on his jacket flashing. Ludwig lifted his chin, letting them all see him, every place he matched Gilbert.

'I am Alfred F. Jones, first lieutenant of the American Air Force. I've come to do a prisoner exchange,' he announced, voice full and steady. Ludwig found the dark grey eyes of the guard who had given him the photo of the prison, and saw his smile. He accepted the papers without looking at them. They'd all been expecting this.

'Which prisoner are you exchanging for?'

'Feliciano Vargas.'

They let them through. Ludwig breathed in the East air. It didn't feel like *home*, not the way Feliciano did. Nothing did. He barely looked at the grey buildings, and kept his eyes on the sky until the prison door clanged shut behind them with finality. Only then could he breathe out, blinking away the sunspots.

When he could see again, he saw why Alfred had stopped. A guard stood in front of them, starved and pale, eyes overbright and glittering like birds' did, hair stuck up in spikes. Ludwig would have known his brother anywhere.

'You're here for the prisoner exchange,' he rasped. When Alfred nodded, Gilbert silently turned and led the way, boots clicking. He still held his head cocked, still hunched forwards. Ludwig knew him too well.

'Leave him in there with the other,' he instructed, pointing to a room. 'I have to go get the second prisoner. Come with me.'

Alfred opened his mouth to protest, but Gilbert caught Ludwig's eyes, harsh and raw and *connecting* all too deeply. Feliciano was in that room. Gilbert *knew*, knew his baby brother was a hopeless lover, knew Ludwig loved someone enough to give himself up to the East for them, and he was giving him one last goodbye.

Ludwig shook his head at Alfred, wondering if he could feel how he was shaking. Gilbert unlocked the door. Ludwig was sure he was the only one who could see how his brother's hands trembled.

As soon as the door shut and locked again, Ludwig turned to see Feliciano, standing there, bruised and starved and taken apart by the pieces. Wrecked by the East. He took a step forward, rage and love and *want* rising through him, and then another and another until Feliciano collapsed into his arms and they held each other in the grey, held on and whispered each other's names like prayers. Ludwig could barely breathe, mapping the starved ripple of his ribs through his thin shirt, cupping his face, *Feliciano, Feliciano, Feliciano*. He was

finally with him again. That was all that mattered. He was what made everything in the world worth it, made everything beautiful.

'Ludwig,' Feliciano gasped into his chest, tears tracking down his cheeks. 'Ludwig, oh God, you're here. You're here.'

'I'm here, lieblich,' Ludwig whispered, kissing his hair and cheeks, kissing his soft mouth, sinking into his warmth, starving and sated and wanting more, more, more. 'I'm here now. It's all going to be okay. You're safe, I promise.'

'How did you convince them?' Feliciano asked, wiping tears away with the back of his hand, smiling in the way he'd fallen in love with. 'Did you go to the Americans?'

'I went to Alfred. The pilot.' Ludwig kissed him again, deeply. A kiss for goodbye, a kiss for all the futures they'd promised each other. His heart sang for him, Feliciano Vargas, his artist, his love, the most beautiful person in the world. When they separated, Feliciano was gasping again, golden eyes shining. 'You are everything to me, Feliciano. Do you know that? You save me, you make me so happy. You've given me more than I ever thought I could experience in this life, and I want to give you that future you dreamed of.'

Feliciano's hands curled in his hair, pulling him down. Ludwig pressed their foreheads together, choking on tears and love. 'You save me,' he said again, worshipping the curves of his body, kissing the tears from his cheeks, the soft noises from his mouth. 'A long time ago, you told me I was so much more than a guard. Feliciano, my sweetheart, you are worth so, so much more than me.'

'Ludwig,' he gasped, meeting him again. 'I love you.'

'I love you so much.' He kissed his hair, smiling to himself, pulse thrumming like a broken city. 'Promise me you'll live for us both.'

Feliciano stilled at that, gazing up at him. 'Ludwig,' he repeated, like a hopeless prayer. The sudden terror in his tone hurt. 'What did you do?'

Ludwig cupped his face. 'I did what I had to.'

'No.' Feliciano's hands fisted in his jacket, voice breaking. 'Ludwig, no, *please*.'

'You're going to live,' Ludwig said, tracing lines across his back. Feliciano clutched him, sobs wracking through his starved chest. Ludwig could only hold onto him. 'I chose you over myself from the moment we met, and I would do it again as many times as I needed.'

'No,' he repeated, shaking. Ludwig adjusted his ragged collar, and found himself being kissed again, fierce and breaking. He kissed him back, whispering all his love and goodbyes.

'I love you, Feliciano,' he whispered.

'I love you too,' he said, over and over. They lost themselves in each other, in the war songs of Berlin, two people desperate for this last connection. For a memory. Ludwig pressed a kiss to his curls, tasting salt.

'Ti amo,' he said softly.

'Ich liebe dich,' Feliciano returned. His voice was broken and quiet now. Better people should have loved him from the very beginning, Ludwig thought, and better people would. He deserved it. He deserved everything, and the only thing Ludwig could give to him was himself. They kissed until they were both breathless and it still would never be enough. Ludwig wasn't worth him, but God, he loved him, he loved him so much. Saving him was the only thing of worth his soldier's heart would ever do. He could feel Feliciano's heart against his, their pulses melding.

'Everything will be okay now,' Ludwig said to the silence. They stood there, holding on, until the door rattled, and then they stepped away and Ludwig said his final goodbye, *lebewohl, mein Schatz*. Feliciano's hands brushed over his gloves in a final movement, gold eyes gleaming and broken and sad, impossibly sad. The paint still in the leather left gold and blue faint across his fingertips.

Gilbert stood there with Alfred and a man Ludwig didn't recognize. For a heartbeat, he thought his brother's eyes softened, sadder than he was sure he was capable of. It was gone before he was sure.

'Vargas,' Alfred said, holding out a hand. Feliciano walked forward, looking back at Ludwig at the last moment. It spoke of all of their promises, all of their futures of art and love. They would happen, but Ludwig wouldn't be around to see them.

The door closed, and Ludwig was left alone with his older brother in the East again.

## Chapter End Notes

:: The roar of crowds united

# Chapter Eleven

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The door closed, leaving Ludwig in the grey room, and all the colour and light was gone with him. Feliciano couldn't breathe.

A hand closed around his upper arm, holding him upright.

'We have to keep moving,' a soft, hoarse voice ordered beside him. Feliciano felt himself move, stumbling forward behind the pilot, held up by the other man even as it felt like he would tear open right down the middle, split him into broken artist's cities and starlight. The world couldn't keep moving, not while Ludwig was still in the room shrinking out of sight down the hall, not while Feliciano walked away from him.

Ludwig's words had been the world ending, Feliciano thought, empty and cracking and so horribly, horribly empty, for now and only now did he understand what Ludwig had meant when he promised Feliciano *everything*, *liebling*, with soft blue eyes and that gentle smile.

*Take me back*, Feliciano wanted to scream to the pilot as they left the prison, left Ludwig locked away. He didn't want this. This wasn't supposed to happen to them.

The world had collapsed in on itself on this clear blue day, *golden days* Feliciano might have called them if he could remember colour- collapsed down to a grey room and kind blue eyes and the last brush of their fingers together that had torn him down to pieces. Feliciano kept moving, through the checkpoint into the gaudy glittering West, too bright on his eyes, but he was still stuck in a steel and concrete room, caught between a kiss and a promise.

He vaguely noticed that they'd stopped, and that the pilot, Alfred, was in front of him. He had blue eyes, too, but not quite the same shade. Summer blue, like he'd been struck through with sunlight and lightning. Ludwig's were a clearer blue, and so *gentle*...

'Vargas.' The pilot's voice broke. 'Feliciano.'

Feliciano couldn't meet his gaze anymore. He turned away, struggling to drag breath through the tangle of pain and fear and empty loss in his chest. The pilot held something out to him, hands shaking. 'He wanted me to give this to you.'

Feliciano took it. It was his poetry book, a memory of all those safer times, when a promise meant only to love and meet again. His grip tightened on it, choking back a building, surging panic.

'I'm sorry,' Alfred said. He reached forward, but reconsidered, tucking his hands into his jacket pockets. His voice was shattered. 'I'm so sorry, Feliciano.'

He backed away, and then turned to run. Feliciano crumpled to his knees, lost in the soft worn pages of better times. Everything in him had always been Ludwig's, and now it was gone to the East, gone to a grey room. He screamed, clutching the book to his chest, breaking to pieces one more way in a filthy backstreet of Berlin. Ludwig was gone.

He didn't know how he could feel so empty and hurt so badly at the same time. He tucked his knees up to his chest, holding onto the last piece of their lives before.

'Feliciano,' the man beside him whispered. Feliciano dragged his eyes up, barely seeing. The world blurred blue with the sky. The man's face was hollow and exhausted, lined with pain. 'Ludwig was yours?'

Ludwig was his and Feliciano was his and now he was gone. His beautiful, brave Ludwig, gone, and it was his fault for not being strong enough. He nodded, burying his face back into his knees, hurting so, so much.

'Do you have a place to stay here?'

Feliciano forced a word out, though his throat was raw. 'Yes.'

'Where?' The hand on his arm was weak, but Feliciano rose, leaning against him. He was hollow. The man let go and followed him through the streets. Feliciano concentrated on nothing but walking.

When he opened the door, it almost broke him again. There was Ludwig's portrait, on its stand, full of light and life and love. He staggered, dropping the poetry book, sick and exhausted and *hurting*.

'I need...' He closed his eyes, wanting to scream again. He needed Ludwig, he needed the world to be better. He needed to be in the East again, in a grey room, and watch Ludwig walk out instead of him.

But Ludwig- brave, so *brave*, had given him everything. He'd given himself, he'd promised Feliciano the *future*, but he didn't know what the future was like without Ludwig. The days ahead stretched out grey and dull.

'You should go to bed,' the man said. His voice was tired, pained with loss. Feliciano bent to pick up the poetry book again and let go of everything else, letting the man guide him to his bedroom. He curled into his bed, aching to slip away, to stop thinking and feeling and *loving*. The man backed away and Feliciano reached out weakly.

'Will you come back?' he asked. The man hesitated.

'I will. In the morning.' He pressed his lips together. 'I'm sorry.'

The lights went out and he heard the man leaving with a slow, pained step. He couldn't move, too empty to even sleep. The bed still smelled like Ludwig, but he was cold and West Berlin felt grey and half-empty. It was Ludwig's city, bright and powerful as him, and yet he was gone.

*Everything is going to be okay*, Ludwig had promised. Feliciano stared blindly into the moonlight slipping in through the window, the empty space where Ludwig used to be in his chest tearing wider until he felt like he would slip in.

When Feliciano woke up, there was a moment in the soft sunlight where everything was as it should be before he remembered, remembered *everything* of his wonderful, too-brave soldier, giving Feliciano his own life. He rolled over, muffling his keening loss into the pillow. He wasn't coming back. He wasn't coming back and it was Feliciano's fault, if he had been stronger, if he hadn't been taken, if he hadn't told them Ludwig's name, none of this would have happened.

He laid there, aching all over as the sunlight slid across the room until the door creaked open again. The man came to sit on the bed beside him. He was gaunt, eyes dull.

'Are you awake?'

Feliciano nodded, eyes half-open. 'Thank you for...helping me.'

He nodded, looking pained still, and distracted. 'I found my...' His hands curled into fists, and then dropped away. 'Her name is Elizabeta. I told her about what had happened.'

It was a struggle to even focus on the words, but Feliciano nodded. He didn't know what it mattered.

'You can come live with us. It might be...better than this.'

Feliciano managed to sit up. 'I'd like to.'

This place was full of different dreams, different times, better memories. He wanted to leave it behind for now. Everything was raw with memory. Feliciano shuffled out of bed, noticing he was still in his old clothes. He reached to fix his collar, but dropped his hands.

'Thank you,' he whispered again.

They walked to a different house, sturdy and clean. The man raised a hand to knock on the door, lips pressed together, looking unable to move for a moment. The door swung open regardless, and a woman stepped forth.

'Roderich.' Her voice was tight with pain. The man, Roderich, dropped his gaze, shoulders crumpling in. The woman looked past him to see Feliciano, and her gaze softened. 'This is him?'

'Feliciano Vargas,' Roderich affirmed. The woman nodded and opened the door wider. The house was airy, full of potted plants.

'Elizabeta,' Roderich said softly. Elizabeta walked past him to look over Feliciano.

'Roderich told me what had happened. I'm sorry.'



A woman came running out of another room, her body turning to Elizabeta's like a needle pointing north. Elizabeta *breathed* as their eyes met, like stars dancing closer in their constellations. Something beautiful and perfect and here Feliciano stood in the middle of it, broken down the middle, ruined and lost, swaying on his feet, the hollow empty ache inside of him suddenly sharpening into another horrible lance of pain. *I had that*, he wanted to scream, *I had Ludwig, I was his once, everything was better.*

He had to look away, clutching the battered book in his pocket. He didn't deserve to see that sort of gentle happiness, that kind of love. It was all left behind in the East.

Feliciano let Elizabeth direct him to bed, drifting among voices and love. He watched the woman and Elizabeta disappear down the hallway, leaving him and Roderich at his doorway. His eyes were haunted.

'Roderich,' Feliciano whispered. He looked over at him hazily, barely focusing. Feliciano was tired, and he could think of nothing but Ludwig's last words. 'What does *Lebewohl* mean?'

For a moment, his blurry purple eyes cleared with a note of anger. 'Who told you that word?'

Feliciano looked away. 'Ludwig.'

The anger suddenly vanished, and his shoulders slumped. 'It means goodbye. Forever.'

Feliciano watched him walk away down the hallway, in the opposite direction as Elizabeta. He locked the door of the bedroom. It was safer here, further away from memories. This was a place empty of Ludwig, empty of promises. He was utterly lost. Berlin was a city meant for Ludwig, and he didn't know how it had felt like home before him.

In bed, he opened the poetry book, sinking into the words of love and war and the places where they wove together. He didn't notice he was crying until he tasted salt, until the weight of Ludwig's absence slipped through his lungs, choking. The words blurred.

At the back of the book was what looked like another poem. Feliciano bent closer until the words swam into focus. It was a letter, penned in the back of this book of hopeful words, prayers to other loves, other lovers reading. Feliciano gasped, salt running down his throat, tracing the words.

*My lieblich, Feliciano,*

*When you read this, I suppose I will be gone. The world doesn't need another soldier. It needs artists. You showed me that. I am not a poet. I am not an artist in any way, but I still write this for you.*

*You will change the world, Feliciano. You changed mine.*

*You are the one who knows beauty and hope and peace and all the wonderful and gentle things in the world that I did not. You showed me a world when I knew nothing but war, and I can never express how much I love you for it.*

*You are my everything, Feliciano.*

*You deserve to have a future of art. You deserve love, and someone who isn't a soldier, and someone who knows gentleness better than I.*

*I love you. I love you so much.*

*Ich liebe dich, mein Schatz*

*Ludwig*

Feliciano drank in the words, a sob wrenching out of him, thick in his throat. Ludwig. He missed him. He wanted Ludwig. He wanted his arms around him and the deep rumble of his voice and his beautiful blue eyes, he wanted to see him smile and hear his laugh and have him close. He wanted to tell him that he loved him like art and colour, loved him in the way artists loved the most beautiful things in the world. He wished he could tell him *ti amo* one last time.

He pressed a shuddering kiss to the last words. *Ich liebe dich, mein Schatz*. He loved him so, so much.

Ludwig had given him the world, but it wasn't the same if he wasn't there with him, for Feliciano to kiss and hold and love, for him to show paintings and art to. He would give the world to see him one last time, to kiss him and be held by him and tell him he was everything, everything to Feliciano. Ludwig Beilschmidt had promised him *everything* at the cost of his own life, and Feliciano buried his face in his pillow and keened for him, for beautiful things broken between the two halves of Berlin on sunny clear blue-sky days.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Pine trees dripping rain at dawn

# Chapter Twelve

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been a long time since Ludwig knew what prayer was. His brother had taken him to one of the churches a lot time ago, before the war, and kneeled in the painted light. He gave it up after that. They all did. There was no time to pray when the world was ripped apart.

But there had been prayer and worship and something holy, holy, in the gold of Feliciano's eyes. There was a crooning prayer to these steel halls and the hell of this prison, there was peace at the end of Ludwig's world because Feliciano was safe.

He laid there, in the dark, careful not to rest on the worst bruises, and dreamed himself into the glowing world of art and gentle beauty that was Feliciano Vargas. He dreamed of the lilt of his voice and his gasps and the way he laughed and sang and how he'd always looked at him like he could see something worth loving in Ludwig. *I love you*, he thought, mouthing the words to the silent dark, *I love you, if this is the end than it is a nobler one than in the grip of the nuclear wars-*

Somewhere outside his cell he heard the scrape of Gilbert's footprints again, and found his mouth tilted up in a snarling smile, cheeks wet with salt, bruised and bloodied body heaving with a heart steady with purpose. *Liebling, you saved me first.*

In the morning, he was led back to a room that was quickly becoming familiar. He could feel his brother watching, knew his presence like the bruising heavy beat of this city, and he kept his head high. He didn't bother answering when they pretended to interrogate him. It was all just to break his unbreakable brother.

Even like this, the days started to blur. Ludwig couldn't remember when he'd last slept, or where half his wounds had come from. He didn't know why he still held on. The guards would kill him soon, he knew they would, either by accident or on purpose, and maybe *then* Gilbert would finally fall. He dreamed of Feliciano, even though he couldn't tell if it was hallucinations or if he'd finally drifted off, his body shutting down, retreating back into that last bastion before death. It was peaceful in those moonlit moments in his cell, watching Feliciano sing, sitting on his bed and swinging his legs, happy and beautiful and safe.

Sometimes he saw Gilbert staring at him with wide and stricken eyes through the hallways and could only think *give in, give in, what do either of us have left anymore? What is there left to fight for?*

Gilbert visited one night. Ludwig's head was full of better memories, and it took him a moment to register who was standing outside his cell.

'Ludwig,' his brother said brokenly. Ludwig wondered what he must look like, seeing how Gilbert stared at him. Bloody and scarred-up and ragged. If the guards went any further, they'd match. As Ludwig looked up at him, outlined in moonlight like the avenging angel

spoken of in prayers, he found himself smiling again, tasting coppery blood, borrowing the wildness of this city and his brother, a harsh and vicious and vindictive pleasure that the very sight of him could hurt Gilbert now. Some part of him still recoiled, some part that still sang of love, but there was no love here. His heart was Feliciano's in the West and once that was gone, Ludwig Beilschmidt was just like his brother.

'Hello, Gilbert,' he said, and his voice came out raspy the same way, hoarse with disuse. They eyed each other as if ready to fight, and Ludwig's gaze drifted to the notched gun at his hip. They waited in the moonlight, waited for each other to break.

For the first time, Gilbert gave in first, looking away, and that broke the haze for a moment, shocking Ludwig silent.

'So, you're in the East again,' Gilbert said, hand tightening on his gun, still staring at the ground. All the screams of their argument rose between them again, but Ludwig lifted his chin. He wasn't scared of this man anymore.

'You saw him. The reason I'm here,' Ludwig goaded. He couldn't help himself. This place had stripped everything good out of him, and Gilbert brought out his worst.

Gilbert's mouth pulled in a snarl and a pained grimace. 'I saw, believe me.'

'I don't regret it.' Ludwig jerked his head at all of it, at himself, the blood matted in his hair and the bruises blooming on his chest, wearing them like war paint until the end. 'I love him,' he said, and the words felt like kissing Feliciano all over again, the bravery and strength of them. In the dark of this hell, he'd finally found himself. 'I love him more than anything, and nothing you did to me ever stopped me from that.'

Gilbert's gaze flashed up to him, pale and blazing copper. 'I did it to save you.'

'I don't think you've ever saved me,' Ludwig returned coldly. His wrecked voice was dark and resonant in the hallway. 'You're *Stasi*, Gilbert. How long do you think it will be until they bring *you* in to interrogate me?'

Gilbert nearly flinched, haggard and crooked in the spilling light, quicksilver down to his bones. 'I saved you,' he insisted. 'I should have. All of this was- all of this *is* so I could keep you safe. I saved some people, Ludwig. You, and Roderich, and Francis. I thought you'd be smarter than giving everything up for an *artist*-'

'You'd never understand,' Ludwig spat, fists curling, his aching body tensing for a fight. Saving Feliciano was the best thing he'd ever done. 'I love him. I don't think you're capable of loving anything but this city, Gilbert.'

Gilbert did flinch at that, shattered completely open for a moment, jerking back like Ludwig had struck him. And then his face closed off completely, blank and perfect, a true officer of this city and this war just around the corner. He turned and walked away, swaying with drunkenness. Ludwig watched him go and finally spoke.

'Who's Roderich?'

Gilbert stopped, and his hand jumped to his throat. 'It doesn't matter,' he said after a long pause, voice brittle and harsh. 'He'll forget me anyways.'

He disappeared around the corner and Ludwig curled back onto his bed, not knowing why he felt guilty. That night, he didn't dream of Feliciano.

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The guards left him slumped over on the interrogation table, a new gash above his eye, body screaming in protest with bruises. He was so tired, and his blurry mind was tangled around Gilbert, *always Gilbert*- his firebrand, traitor brother, unbreakable, the reason for all of this. His head spun, staring up at the lights, begging himself to give up, give in, slip away into the quiet dark of the pain. He didn't know why he didn't.

The first touch of scarred and crooked hands against his made him wish he had. Everything burned as he jerked himself away, smearing blood off his face with the back of his good hand, recoiling from the man.

'Do not *touch* me,' he snarled. Gilbert had no right to try to fix him, he had no right to touch him and try at kindness. His brother still looked broken, hands still stretched towards him. Ludwig forced himself to his feet, vision narrowing, the cut on his head throbbing, and pushed past him to return to his cell. He kept going, because it was the only thing he knew how to do. He didn't know how to fall out of love with this city or his brother or what used to be their life together.

That night, when Gilbert came to his cell, he still had dark rusty streaks down the front of his uniform jacket. Ludwig knew it was his own blood, and touched the cut again.

'Don't,' Gilbert said roughly, but his hands shook slightly as he leaned forward to clean it off. 'If you don't take care of that, it'll scar easy. Head wounds usually do.'

His own scar glinted silver against his shining pale skin, arching over his brow. Ludwig already had enough scars, and this one wasn't any different. He moved closer to the bars and let his brother fix some part of him, too tired to fight the nature of obeying Gilbert's every move, drifting in the familiar movements of his wounds being cleaned.

'I saw him,' Gilbert said, quietly, so quietly that Ludwig could have pretended he was asleep or hadn't heard. He kept his eyes closed and listened, chest twisting tighter inside of him. 'Your artist. I knew you loved him. I knew you were going to save him. We're like that, baby brother.' He let go and Ludwig heard him step back. 'We don't know how to let go of a lost cause.'

Gilbert couldn't do that, Ludwig wanted to snarl. He wasn't allowed to touch the one beautiful thing in Ludwig's life, he could not put his bloodied hands on Feliciano. Those months in West Berlin had been the happiest of his life, and Gilbert had no sway on him, not anymore.

Quiet, in the steel hallways, until Ludwig spoke, loathing with his blood-deep loyalty to his brother, a cause lost seven years before he had been born.

'I should have killed you,' he whispered. 'The day you threw me out.'

'You should have.' Crooked fingers grazed through his hair before Ludwig could pull himself away again, further from the bars. The absence of Feliciano was as real as the loss of sight or sun or beauty. He was so exhausted and lonely that he could barely move away.

'Do you think they'll kill us soon?' His voice shuddered at it, and he despised the weakness. Gilbert's face was shadowed, his expression faraway.

'You, maybe,' he said. He tilted his head, staring at Ludwig like he only saw the past. 'They've already killed me.'

He walked away again, stride loose and swaying, and Ludwig touched the soon-to-be scar over his eye, hoping that the Soviets would soon give him something worse. He didn't want to look like Gilbert. He didn't want to be like Gilbert, a soldier only made of sacrifice, but he knew he was. In the end, blood always won out. The streets were thick with it.

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He felt his death in the weeks before. Too much blood lost, too many wounds, too many years with the kindness choked out of him by pale eagle's talons. It was curious; he could feel it, the soft dark weight settling against his chest, against the broken ribs, cupped in the mess of his hands. He wove a cradle for his own death out of memory and laughter from a different time, welcoming the quiet.

They didn't bring him out to interrogate anymore. He didn't see Gilbert, and didn't know if the touches he felt were hallucinations or real. He'd wondered before how people could know they were dying, but he knew now. It was as real as his own broken body.

In his dreams, Feliciano sang to him. In his dreams, he was whole not just in body but finally in spirit, something not tarnished and twisted by Gilbert and wartime and violence, something as kind as Feliciano had said he was. Ludwig loved that dream of himself and only wished that it could have been something real. Feliciano would have deserved it. He deserved the world and Ludwig would pay this price for it a thousand times.

He was faintly aware of his wounds being patched sometimes, but the break in him went deeper than that. If he was awake when Gilbert came to try to help him, he would have laughed- if he could still laugh at all- and told him to fix all the damage of the wars and life in this city before he fixed one more scar. It would be impossible, Ludwig was unfixable, he was sure of it. He knew Gilbert would try anyways, but it was too late.

In the pearly grey quiet, waiting for death, Ludwig sang back the lyrics to a song meant for better people, better loves, whispering *Lebewohl* to an artist who shone like sunlight and gold. Feliciano was safe away from this shattered soldier, and everything, everything would be okay in his memories and dreams; *as long as I have you!*

:: Beauty seen and held and cherished silently, painfully, wonderfully

# Chapter Thirteen

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Feliciano could never remember a period where his life was silent. His family had always been loud and bright with love, and Berlin was a roaring city, its harsh song made of ash and gunmetal and laughter.

This house hummed with music spinning on the record player downstairs, with the sigh of the wind through the plants in the windowsills. When Feliciano could rouse himself from his nightmares to hear, the place sang with love. He would have loved it and sang along if he wasn't blind and deaf and choking, trying to see and dream himself to Ludwig, terrified of what could be happening in the East. He was paralyzed by guilt as real as shackles, asking himself over and over what made him worthy of being here, safe and warm and alive, when Ludwig wasn't.

Feliciano tried to scream at himself, tried to voice all the pain and fear and *grief*, but they caught just behind his teeth, silent and trapped.

Roderich came in to talk to him sometimes, but Feliciano could barely focus on his quiet, pained voice, trying so hard to fight the horrible images of what could be happening just across the Wall. In the end, Roderich sat at the end of the bed and whispered soft crooning words, sounding like birdsong and gunfire and the snarling song of Berlin. Sometimes he looked at Feliciano as if he saw someone else there.

He dreamed of the prison and woke with his body seized with lances of pain, coughing out bile, screaming at himself, replaying the hell of leaving the man he loved behind. He could barely remember what the prison had done to him before that, but his abused body recalled every bruise. He was vaguely aware of Roderich by his side through the hazy twilight, coaxing him through his fever until it broke, and gazing down at him with eyes dark with his own pain.

He'd survive. His body would heal. The damage was not as severe as they'd thought, only exacerbated by shock and grief. It was easy, easy to heal the body, Feliciano knew, compared to healing the gaping darkness inside him. How did they heal how the whole world had lost its beauty?

The only thing that sometimes soothed the bleakness was Roderich. He understood what had happened. They needed no words. Roderich sat with him during the golden afternoon and Feliciano watched the light made patterns on the wall and how grief made them flat and as stirring as plain rock. The damage was all inside. Grief killed nearly as well as blood loss.

Feliciano couldn't tell the exact date Roderich's visits stopped coming, only that his last memory of the man was of a touch to his hot forehead and a whisper of goodbye.



The woman Elizabeta loved came to water her plants in the windowsill planter. They did not speak, but she lingered after, and she left the window open if he could stir himself to nod to it, and once she brought him flowers, whispering that they were from the garden out back. They were small and clustered and the clearest, deepest blue he had ever seen. He struggled up to hold them after she had left, drinking in the colour, silent wracking sobs shuddering through him. They were the colour of Ludwig's eyes. He wanted to throw them away immediately and see them burn for the raw pain he felt at the sight of them, and he wanted to drown in the petals, and he wanted *Ludwig* so badly.

When she came in the next day to see him still clutching them against his broken heart, against the book of poems, she simply went to refill the vase. When she returned, Feliciano forced words through the choking block in his throat, rough as if he'd been running, running all the way to this peaceful house from that hell of concrete in the East.

'Thank you,' he whispered.

She sat down and carefully arranged the new flowers in the vase. 'They're beautiful, aren't they?'

He nodded, even though he couldn't see it. They made him feel something. Pain and hurt and a different, sharper grief, different than the grey choke of the grief that felt like it would kill him. Feeling, hurting, that was as close to *beautiful* as Berlin would allow him now, and he would take it.

She came back the next day with the same flowers. Feliciano felt too unsteady to speak much more, but he tried. It was like learning to paint had been, so many years ago. Learning to breathe and live and feel this tiny hint of emotion in a world gone to grey.

'These flowers,' he rasped. 'The name?'

'Cornflowers. They're quite popular here.' She brushed a hand through the tulip behind her ear, a beautiful creamy red and white. 'This one is my personal favourite, though.'

'It suits you,' he said with an effort, and she laughed.

'Elizabeta thinks so, too.' She picked one of the cornflowers and tucked it behind his ear. The nightmares still came that night, the guilt and grief crashing through him like dark cold waves on the rocks, but for the first time he breathed through it even as he let it take him, letting the grief swallow him, letting himself drown for the pause between, waiting for the blue sky of morning.

Elizabeta came to visit as well the next morning, when Feliciano was still remembering breathing, focusing only on the sound of his heart and matching his breathing to the steady rhythm.

'Feliciano,' she said, sitting down. The bed creaked slightly, and he reached out a hand for the gentle sound. Elizabeta's hands were broad and warm, the nails short, the lines in her palms slightly gritty with soil. A comforting hand. 'Emma said you enjoyed the cornflowers.'

'I do.' He wore a sprig of it behind his ear every night. It softened the last touches in the prison, the last nights before the world had been bleached pale by war. Ludwig used to like to kiss him there.

'I want you to help me plant some in that window box. I had to get Emma's permission, of course, it's her box-' She leaned over to affectionately squeeze her hand. 'But she agreed, and we've wanted some blue in this planter for a while. They won't last long, it's late to be replanting, but they'll look nice.'

Feliciano hesitated, unsure for a moment. The idea of action felt like a jump into the unknown, a free fall, but he'd been falling a thousand ways for Ludwig, and he would rather drown in memory than in guilt.

'I will,' he finally said. Elizabeta directed him to the bathroom to clean up once he was ready to start. They'd officially begin redoing the window box tomorrow, he could rest for now.

'I didn't think they damaged your legs too much. You can probably stand tomorrow,' Elizabeta said, frowning at the blankets. 'You were bruised worse beneath your clothes, though. Those *bastards*.'

Feliciano had barely paid attention to his bruises in favour of the grey press of grief. The few days in the prison hadn't been long enough to kill him. He pretended to shrug it off, even though he felt suddenly exhausted. He knew he wasn't believed, but he was too tired to speak again.

They left him a mirror, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a comb, and some water when they left. He stared at the mirror- a bit tarnished with a simple smooth handle, face down on the table- as if it was a coiled snake, so unsure of what the world had taken it of him. He didn't know what was left inside of him, and for a moment he was terrified that all he would see staring back was a ghost.

When he finally picked it up, his hands shook so badly he nearly dropped it. He looked like a dead man. The shock nearly made him drop the mirror again, but he held on and breathed, slowly raising his eyes to his own face. Pale and hollow-cheeked, carved into a monster that suited this city by grief, but alive. Alive and breathing, with the bright bloom of a cornflower behind his ear.

*Promise me you'll live for both of us*, Ludwig had said. Feliciano watched the tears spill from the wide eyes in the mirror, watched the monstrous creature there cry and gasp, watch its pale mouth turn up into what once was or would be a smile. He could see the mottling of bruises on his cheekbone and beneath his collar, and he couldn't look away from the swirl of colours. The war city of Berlin had devoured him alive and reforged him with the blood thick in the streets. Was he still an artist after his muse was gone, after he was blinded to beauty? Was he some sort of soldier now, or the makings of one? A monster with nothing left to live for and nothing more to lose?

Feliciano had sworn long ago to never be a soldier. Perhaps Berlin had space inside for someone who was still a *lover*, that weapon-prayer of a world, even with no lover to match. He would find or make that space, somewhere, some time in the future after all this was done

and passed. He would keep breathing and he would write a poem for the book that kept his heart beating, about soldiers who became artists and not the other way around.

He stared at the monstrous reflection of himself until he couldn't bear it anymore and put the mirror back, face down. He brushed his teeth, trying not to spill too much toothpaste, but left the comb for now. He was so, so tired, much more than any other day here, but he felt accomplished by the simple thing of seeing the mirror. It was enough, for now, for now.

The next morning, Elizabeta let him hold onto her as he stumbled out of bed. His legs seemed fine, apart from the bruising and the stiffness. He was too tired to speak, even though he felt like he could. The tumble of words that had always come so easily still pushed at his lips, but whenever he tried to speak them, he couldn't will voice. They accepted his silence, and laughed easily as they all moved around, replanting the bunches of cornflowers. Feliciano had a chair nearby just in case, and leaned on it to watch the flowers bob their heads. He felt...*safe*. Safe and warm and happy, the hints of those emotions just gleaming through the fog. He could be happy, some day. He could be safe.

When it was done, Elizabeta looked delighted. Her long hair was caught in tangles with stray stems, all behind her wide hat, and there were smudges of soil on her nose, and Emma looked at her so *adoringly* that Feliciano had to focus on his hands and will away the sudden pang of *memory*, but he held onto it for later.

He turned the memory over after they had left and he could hear them laughing downstairs. He had looked at Ludwig that way, and Ludwig at him. He tucked it away again soon, but he had held the past and it had not broken him yet.

He got up by himself later on to check on the flowers, as the rain came down in sheets, blurring Berlin into a world of glassy gleaming false stars. He breathed, and he traced the words of the letter and the soft petals of the cornflowers, and he let himself cry for the world and Ludwig and the future, heart breaking a thousand more ways. He sang to Berlin and a man who was so much more than a soldier, sang a song he'd loved until he was hoarse and breathless, and though he cried he *smiled*.

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In the dark, Gilbert sang to him. Ludwig let himself be held, let his hair be touched and pushed back from his face, let his brother cry over his shattered body. He let it happen because Gilbert needed his *baby brother* to let it happen. Because he had lived his whole life *because Gilbert needed him to*, and why should he change now? Because his heart belonged to Feliciano, so nothing and nobody else could ever hurt him anymore.

Gilbert hadn't sung to him for years. When they first came to Berlin, ten years ago, that was the last night Ludwig had his brother sing to him. To his ten-year-old baby brother, next to alone in a city full of teeth and fire and war. Ludwig had held onto him and believed all the sweet soft words of that birdsong lullaby before Gilbert and his city tore it out of him, *to make you stronger, baby brother*. He tasted salt and copper.

To Gilbert's city. That's where he'd sold his life two years ago, to the crushing grip of the newest armed forces. Feliciano had saved him from that, saved him from his brother, from

the war of Berlin, but in the end, wasn't it fitting for Ludwig to be dying here, in the arms of the man who had given him wings and burned his life to the ground?

Gilbert's voice still broke on the high notes as he sang Ludwig to sleep. Ludwig had never heard him sob this way before. He hadn't even known Gilbert could cry, or that he ever would for him. His brother loved him, but he could have fooled Ludwig. He did, for years.

In the dark, Ludwig dreamed. He dreamed of a world where Feliciano was safe and happy, because at the end of his world, that was all that mattered anymore. In the dark, he didn't have to be scared of nuclear war or his brother anymore.

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Winter came with cold steel teeth and bitter winds. Feliciano could walk easier now, though he kept close to the wall just in case. He fell easily into life here in this warm house, even if it wasn't right. It was enough, he pretended. The light slowly crept back into the world, in his window box before winter, in the pressed cornflowers that he saved between the pages of his poetry book after the winds came.

Emma took him back to his old flat one day, to pick up his old things. Ludwig's portrait was still on its frame. He brushed away the dust and held it as every barrier broke raw for a moment, spilling out all his pain and loss and *love*, so much love. He loved Ludwig Beilschmidt, until the end of his world. How long had it been since he painted that strange, wonderful officer and fallen so deeply for him?

Emma carried most of his things, but as weak as Feliciano still was, he carried the portrait. It hurt to look at it, but it turned the world bright with colour for a breath. Feliciano kept breathing.

'How are you?' Emma asked back at the house. Feliciano mouthed *okay*, as he was accustomed to in their kind of language, part music, part voice, part suggestion. He carried the portrait upstairs and sat with it for a long, long time, whispering wordless promises, laughing a little as he wiped away tears from his cheeks. He could laugh again, and the noise still surprised and delighted him every time. His words were still stuck in his throat some days, but he managed. They all lived on. Maybe someday he would take up painting again, since his hands had mostly stopped shaking.

He heard Elizabeta climbing the stairs behind him and knock at the door. He carefully put the portrait away and knocked back on the floor to tell her to come in.

Elizabeta was holding a book. It had some funny hand shapes on the front, and he couldn't help but be interested. For the first time since the prison, he felt the itch to draw curl at his own fingertips.

'It's a sign language dictionary,' Elizabeta explained. 'In case you want to talk more some days. I mean, you practically talk with your hands anyways,' she grinned, '-but at least this way we've got a standard for it. I've been working on the alphabet.'

She left him to look through it. Feliciano traced the shapes and found himself blinking back tears. He found the shapes for *bird* and the rocket of *astronaut* and carefully signed *I love you* to the pale blue sky and the deep blue petals of the cornflowers he'd pressed and hung above his bed. The world blurred with tears but he was *happy*. He collapsed back on his bed, clutching his poetry and the sign language and signed *I am yours*, overwhelmed at the sudden rush of emotion and the burst of laughter. *I am yours!* he sang, and traced the shapes of Ludwig's name.

Emma picked up the language fastest, but Feliciano still had to teach her to recognize the signs. Elizabeta was glad that she didn't have to sign back to him, but she was good at catching the meaning even when he forgot to slow down and sign at them more slowly. Even when he spoke, it was natural to sign for them, too used to their own language. He made a few signs of his own: one for Emma, for Elizabeta, and one that meant he was thinking of the prison and Ludwig and everything else. In a way, it was easier than speaking. Hearing his own voice brought back all his memories, and even though the days where grief choked him off were not as common, he still preferred only to speak inside the house. The shopkeepers usually understood his enthusiastic signs well enough.

The world breathed again and so did Feliciano, even though he had been torn apart by this city, healed and saved and loved by the most beautiful person he'd ever met. Ludwig was still a wound that would never heal, the world still a little greyer than it should be, Berlin not quite home. But it was enough to breathe through.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Skin shining by firelight during winter

# Chapter Fourteen

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The grief always hung heavy around his neck. Some days, he couldn't get out of bed. Some days he couldn't even move himself to sign, only stare at the ceiling and replay the moment where he'd left Ludwig behind and silently scream at himself for not being good enough, not being brave enough, for everything being all his fault. He wondered if Ludwig was dead yet, or if he had been killed weeks ago, cold and buried in the ground. If the only life left was in Feliciano's dreams and memories and the portrait. The thought threatened to break him. Even now, Feliciano couldn't help but think that this was all a mistake, that Ludwig would simply walk in through the door, blue eyes soft, happy and alive, and Feliciano would run to him and be caught in his arms and laugh because everything, everything would be okay.

He felt the tears on his cheeks, stubborn and silent. He could hear his wracking sobs, the hopeless whispers and pleas for Ludwig. Everything still felt as empty and grey as the beginning. Feliciano stood on the brink of that great looming gap inside, staring down into the abyss that was shattering him apart. He tried to focus on the rest of life, learning new signs and slowly sketching the positions his hands made in *I love you* and *beautiful*, and tried not to think that he would never sign them to the man he wanted to. He wondered if he was unfixable. Sometimes the loneliness and grief still drowned him, dragging him under for days or weeks. Berlin wasn't home without art, without Ludwig, and it never would be. He wondered if he would ever feel whole again.

Feliciano still tried to find art. He managed to walk down to his old art studio, as much as it hurt. It was unchanged in many ways, just as bright and wild, but he felt none of the rushing emotion looking at it, only a sense of all he'd lost.

Inside, in his own studio room, it was quiet. As if it had just been waiting for him to come back. There were his pencils, scattered on the table. There were the half-finished projects and the paint spills and the table he'd sat at with Ludwig and listened to him confess. Where he'd kissed him and Ludwig had looked so happy and beautiful and *free*.

Feliciano crumpled at the table and found a sketch that Ludwig must have done, with his curious mix of detail and idealistic vision, because surely Feliciano didn't look half so angelic even before all of this. He heard himself gasp as he held the drawing of himself the way Ludwig must have seen him. He looked *beautiful*.

And finally the scream tore loose from his throat, for all the things he'd lost, for the kind, brave man who he'd lost to the jaws of the East forever. Ludwig was dead. Ludwig was dead and he was never coming back, and Feliciano was so utterly alone.

He screamed into the curl of his arms until it hurt, until he tasted blood, until his voice collapsed into silence again and he could only sob and clutch the book of poetry. Ludwig was gone and it was Feliciano's fault for love. He was gone and the whole world was cold and empty. Feliciano hurt so, so much.

He stayed there, body locked tight, dead and gone and drowned beneath the grief. He watched the moonlight through the window and wished that he would stop hurting, stop breathing, that the pain would overwhelm him finally and that maybe in some life after this Feliciano could try again.

The door creaked, somewhere in the world outside. He heard the footsteps drawing closer and surrendered himself to whoever it was, obediently raising his head for a bullet.

Francis looked strickenly back at him. He dropped to his knees beside Feliciano's chair, fingertips hovering over his face with hollow cheeks. Feliciano leaned into them, so starved for warm touch.

'Feliciano?' he breathed. 'You're back? Oh God, I had no idea where you were.'

Feliciano couldn't speak. He just nodded, and gave himself over to Francis. It was nice to be looked over now, when he was so tired and he missed Ludwig so much. He managed to sign the directions home, and Francis walked him there, still softly speaking and soothing him.

He heard Elizabeta shouting when he arrived home, but he didn't remember anything except collapsing into bed with the sketch still crumpled in his hand and tears drying on his cheeks.

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When he woke again, he was drained. He lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, and was only roused by the sound of arguing downstairs. It was unusual enough to make him stumble downstairs to face a flushed and angry Francis, and Elizabeta looking furious. Feliciano signed to ask what was going on and Elizabeta's face contorted.

'He wants to break into the East for some *prison raid*!'

Feliciano wasn't aware of lunging forward, only that he had his hands fisted in Francis' heavy coat and that a wild and ridiculous hope was swelling in his throat.

'Why?' he demanded. Francis looked shocked for a moment, and then his tired blue eyes darkened.

'Because Gilbert wants to save his *baby brother*,' he spat, and suddenly *hope* rushed back to the dark world again, flowers in the winter turning to spring.

Ludwig was alive. Somehow, somehow he was alive, and Feliciano threw back his head and spread his arms to the blue sky and *laughed* for the future that suddenly bloomed back into existence like the cornflowers. Tears stung his eyes.

'Ludwig,' he whispered to the soaring ceiling and the blue of the sky. He welcomed it, that burning wonderful colour that had hurt him and healed him so much. The world was alive again.

Emma touched his shoulder and Feliciano let go, too elated to protest as he was guided away. Emma's eyes and mouth were tense.

'Feliciano,' she began, but Feliciano stopped her. *It'll be okay*, he signed. She left him and he stood at the windowsill to gather cornflowers, gazing out at the bright open of Berlin. There was hope again, and Feliciano knew how to hope for the impossible.

He wove the flowers into his hair, into a crown, sank back into bed and dreamed himself back to Ludwig. Berlin had remade him over and over, reforging and reshaping, and all he could do was *hope*, exhausted and elated and aching for better.

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He asked Elizabeta to retrieve the rest of his painting supplies in the morning. Nobody spoke about Francis or what he'd said. They didn't need to. Emma was still tense, and Elizabeta's knuckles were white, but Feliciano had hope again. If everything went wrong and Ludwig died, he knew it would be so much worse, but for now, there was something to strive and reach for.

She came back with his paints and brushes and unfinished canvases of sketches and left to get the rest. It was calming to sink back into art, and he had hope and the bite of courage in his teeth, enough to paint Ludwig from memory. He painted the way he'd looked in the summer nights they'd first kissed, shining bright and golden.

The door rattled and Elizabeta entered. There was a different kind of wariness to her, a steely challenge different than what lingered from Francis. Feliciano immediately sat upright.

'I found someone waiting at your art studio,' she said. 'His name is Alfred. He wants to talk to you.'

The name of the pilot who'd been the key to everything twisted into his heart. Some parts of him wanted to hate Alfred, or run, or tell Elizabeta to never let him come close again. Some parts needed him, that last link to the prison. He slowly signed to let him in, and picked up his brush. Sudden and choking emotion coiled in his throat, adding to the weight against speaking. When Alfred entered, hollow-cheeked, eyes overbright, Feliciano nodded to the bed.

He focused on the familiar lines of his painting when Alfred began to speak.

'Feliciano, are you okay?' Feliciano nodded yes, even though he wasn't sure. Everything was going to change soon. 'I know you probably don't want to think of it again. I know I didn't, and I wasn't even the one who got hurt as badly. I'm sorry for- God, I'm sorry about everything. That's why I'm trying to fix things. I wanted to talk to you.'

Alfred was spilling over with kinetic energy, crackling like lightning across his skin. Feliciano put down his paintbrush to sign, forgetting for a moment that Alfred wouldn't know what had happened. Rage and anguish flared in his eyes.

'Did they- the Stasi, *did they*-'

Panicking, Feliciano attempted to sign one last time before grabbing for some paper and a pen.



'They didn't,' he assured him. 'It's just...harder.'

Alfred rocked back, the fire in his eyes fading. Something of it reminded him of Ludwig, and Feliciano had to stare at his hands and try to breathe again.

'Does it hurt?' Alfred asked cautiously.

*Not here.* Feliciano gestured to his neck. *Here-* the weight in his head, the way words lay heavy and impossible. *I'll be okay,* he wrote. Alfred nodded, hands twisting in his lap.

'I was talking to Francis. He's part of a resistance of some kind in the East.'

Feliciano almost wrote that Ludwig had told him, but he couldn't. *I heard about that.*

'That resistance is planning to raid the prison. I'm going to help.'

Feliciano grabbed him, searching those summer blue eyes. If this was true- if Alfred, with all his lightning-strike power, could help, then Ludwig would be saved and everything in the world would start turning the right way again.

'Ludwig,' he demanded, heart in his throat. 'Save him.'

'I will, I will, I *swear*, Feliciano,' he pleaded, eyes wide, both of them drinking in the other's heartbroken need. Alfred would help. Feliciano trusted his heroism.

He let go, feeling like laughing. He hated to make Elizabeta worry, but he was too tired to do anything but smile. She left, her eyes dark and sorrowful.

Emma came in later and sat on the bed with him.

'Feliciano, you do realize how dangerous this will be. If they succeed in even breaching the prison, Ludwig may already be...'

*I know,* he signed. *I have to believe in this.*

She smiled. 'I know you do. I'd be the same way, if Elizabeta was there.' Her hands tightened into fists. 'She was part of the resistance, before the Wall came up.'

*She was?* Feliciano sat straight up. *Can you ask her about it?*

'Ask her yourself.' Emma opened the door and called down. Elizabeta came up, smiling, and closed the door behind her. Emma made room for her on the bed.

*She said you knew the resistance?*

'I did. I was active a long time ago. I only returned to Berlin right before the Wall, to meet with people I'd known there.' Her thumb traced across Emma's hand, staring out the flower box window. 'The leader I knew is still active. He is a brave man. And since Gilbert has returned...' Old anger flared in her eyes, but she lifted her head. 'If anyone can save Ludwig, it will be them.'

Feliciano hesitated over his next question. *He spoke about Gilbert a few times.*

'He would.' Elizabeta's haze was faraway. 'Ludwig seemed to *live* for his brother. It's the only way he knows how.'

*He told me...* Feliciano trailed off. The memories held so much pain. *Ludwig told me why he was in the West.*

Elizabeta didn't respond. Her eyes were flint, sparking with old rage. Emma rose and guided her up.

'He saved Roderich,' Elizabeta finally said, voice thick with anger. 'That and this attempt for Ludwig is the only selfless acts I believe Gilbert Beilschmidt is capable of.'

*He seemed to live for his brother.* Feliciano wrapped his arms around himself, thinking of how Ludwig had laughed and smiled for him, the quirks of his smile, the gentleness showing through the prison of the uniform. From the beginning, the first time he'd seen the officer on the train, Feliciano knew there was someone kind beneath the soldier's visage. Ludwig was *beautiful*, and he deserved so much better than this, so much more than Feliciano could give him while he was trapped in the West. All that he could do was keep living. All he and Ludwig knew was to hold on in hope of someone else.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Old books burnished copper and gold with the years

# Chapter Fifteen

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The bruises on Feliciano's arm from where the guard had dragged him to prison had long faded, hidden under cuts and scabs, but it still ached. He'd let it happen. He'd let them take him and hurt Lovino, and even if Feliciano *hated* what his brother had done, he hated the Stasi for hurting him even more. It was because of him that Ludwig was at the mercy of the East, his fault that Alfred was so broken-up that he was running to fix that or die trying.

His thoughts and the guilt lay heavy in his mouth and tight around his throat, choking off his words completely and making his hands shake so much that he could barely sign. What happened after this? Would he receive nothing but the whisper that a pilot died in the East, and know that Ludwig died with him, that both their blood was on his hands?

Alfred was a good man, a brave man. He didn't deserve this. Ludwig had never deserved for any of this to happen. When Ludwig told him about his brother, about being thrown out of home, Feliciano had *hated* Gilbert for hurting someone he loved so much.

He'd done the same thing, in the end, and the pain howled to tear him apart. Feliciano welcomed it, opening up his breaking heart to his own harsh, pained words and the knowledge that all of this was his fault.

Feliciano stared at the book clutched in his hands, all the pages worn to velvet, the edges softened by the darkness. He had caused all of this, he and his *love*.

When he was younger Feliciano listened to the story of Achilles and Patroclus, of wars won and lost in love, in pride. He lay on his bed, choking under his own guilt, the sobs trapped with his stumbling tongue, and felt like Marathon running through the streets of this war city, desperate to save something.

He laid awake until morning, closing his eyes against the whisper of memories; Ludwig's hand against his cheek, his voice soothing *everything will be okay now*, his brave, gentle soldier promising Feliciano a world he didn't deserve. His voice finally shuddered out, sobbing into his pillow, tears staining the cover of the poetry book. He didn't deserve any of this, the kindness and the promise of poetry, but he hung on because letting go of this last piece of Ludwig would hurt even worse.

The pale light filtered slowly through the room. Feliciano got up and made his way to the window.

The new cornflowers were coming up in the window box, blooming blue against the dove-grey morning. Feliciano brushed his fingers through the petals and picked a few, weaving the stems into a crown. He tucked one behind his ear.

Was Alfred dead yet? The split stems smelled like growing things, good soil and a clean, green scent. His breathing stuttered and rasped in his chest. While he stood here, breathing in the morning, was Ludwig bleeding out? How could he stand himself, waiting here helplessly and hoping that the Stasi had enough humanity to leave a prisoner alive?

He had to leave. The song of Berlin had dug too far into his bones, wrapped its way around his soft heart. Feliciano built himself on love, for all its hurts, and this city sparked all of him into borrowing bravery.

Elizabeta and Emma would understand, too. Elizabeta understood love, and how Feliciano couldn't stay and sleep and *wait*. He had always loved where he shouldn't, and maybe, maybe that could be a strength now.

He wrote them a letter to say he was going, to say *thank you*, as weak as it was, for everything they had done. They had saved his life in more ways than healing his bruises. To say goodbye, I love you, I will miss you, I hope you're well. All the things he wished he could have said to Ludwig, instead of kissing him in the grey concrete hell and begging for both their lives. For better or for worse, he would never say goodbye that way again.

He left it on the kitchen table under his cornflower crown, picked up the only things he needed- his paints, his clothes, and the portrait- and left into the dawning grey, the silence before the war city's engine started burning, where he could almost imagine this was a softer world, a better world. Where he could imagine it was the day after they met, when he was rushing to the square, and Ludwig saved him for the second time.

If Feliciano could do it all over again, he should have wanted to step away from the officer with the blue eyes and the hints of kindness, to finish his painting and keep his love silent. It would be better that way for Ludwig.

In truth, if he could have met Ludwig anew, he would have confessed his love and they would have ran away from this city the night the tanks gathered at the Wall, and they would be safe somewhere away from the ravenous beast that was Berlin. Ludwig would be next to him now, and *alive*, and smiling away from all the pain and history in that bleeding heart city. They would have been *safe*, but now Ludwig could be dead and Feliciano was running through the streets to nowhere, praying for something better, to be able to fix everything that had happened.

He heard his keening sobs catching in the rafters of the concrete where the birds nested, startling them from their nests. He sunk down, knees to his chest, holding onto the poetry book. The world felt so grey and empty, split down the middle. The birds made dark starbursts against the pearly pale sky, swooping and wheeling. They looked like the constellations in reverse. Watching them, Feliciano slowly calmed his breathing, and started signing to the sky and the birds and the city full of art and war both. He heard the first words of their song stumble out of him in a prayer, his tangled words finally smoothing out.

*I love you, Ludwig*, he said to the sky. The cornflower brushed his cheek, catching dewdrop tears. *I love you for your kindness, even though you didn't see it in yourself. You saved me a thousand ways, even when you shouldn't have. I wish you were here and safe. I want to save you too.*

The birds called as they settled down, perching on trees near Feliciano for a moment to preen before they winged back to their nests. Starlings, like the night sky caught in wings and sparkling jewel eyes.

'As long as I have you,' Feliciano sang. The song was slow and crooning, and he carried the notes as far as he could, holding onto the sense of peace.

His old place was close by, but he didn't want to stay there yet. It would be a good stopping point for now. *For now* was the only thing Feliciano held onto. Just one more breath, one more step forward.

There were too many bad memories, too many shadows in the corners. The poker still lay on the floor. This had been a good place once, and maybe it would be again, but not now. Feliciano left his things there and curled up in the bed for a while. Closing his eyes, it was the only place he felt anything close to normal.

There was a dog nosing around the back when Feliciano left, which tugged a smile out of him. It was a German shepherd with a dirty coat and a ragged collar, and it eagerly charged up to him. It must be a stray. Feliciano petted him for a while and checked his collar. There was part of his name printed on the metal tag, which was dented and partially illegible. It said *-Litz*.

He sat with the dog for a long time, trying to comb the dirt and bristles from his fur. It was truly peaceful in a way he hadn't had since the East. The dog didn't need him to speak or fight to untangle his guilty thoughts and make them into words that made sense. They watched the sun through the trees, streaking the clouds with fire.

'I'll try to get you some food,' Feliciano whispered. His words had smoothed out again, enough to speak a little. He didn't think the dog could understand sign language. The simple companionship felt good, and made him realize just how lonely he was.

He rubbed the dog's ears as he stood up. Most of the people he knew and trusted at all were in the East now. The realization made him cold. If or *when* the raid went bad, he could lose everyone.

He wanted to be there too. He wanted to be the one to bring Ludwig back, but he couldn't. Wouldn't, not after what Ludwig had sacrificed.

His mind suddenly lit on someone else. Roderich would understand, he'd been in the East as well, he'd seen the hells of it. Feliciano barely knew the man, but there was mutual trust and survival between them.

Finding Roderich and buying some dog food with the money still in the house took most of the day, but he finally found a man in a bar who recognized the sketch Feliciano had drawn. He had nice eyes, and the local accent, and he pointed Feliciano towards a concert hall.

As soon as he stepped inside the luxurious building, he knew he didn't belong here. There were still scabs mottling his arms and a cornflower behind his ear, tins and pencils in his

pockets. Artists rarely belonged in these kinds of places, but Feliciano had a mission. He strode up to reception, aware of all the eyes on him, and held up his sketch of Roderich.

'Is he here? He knows me, I need him.'

When Roderich appeared, he looked *raw* with emotion for a moment, strangely hopeful and shattered open, but it disappeared into shock. He hurried Feliciano out.

'Why are you here? Is it Elizabeta?'

*Came here by myself. I live alone now.*

'Why?'

Feliciano hesitated. He'd ran off because he was guilty and he was horrified at what he'd done, because he still loved Ludwig so much it hurt.

*It's about Ludwig. About the prison.*

Roderich's careful expression broke. 'Of course. Do you want to come home with me?'

*Later tonight.* Feliciano felt a small smile. He had to feed the dog.

The dog seemed to enjoy the food. Feliciano surprised himself by laughing when he chased shadows around the lawn. For these little moments, he could forget that everyone he loved was in the East, and that all of them could be dead soon.

Roderich had shown him a page of extremely detailed directions to the house, practically step by step. Feliciano had read only the house location and found it. He was waiting inside, staring out towards the East. When Feliciano let himself in, he started. They watched each other, both of them broken by the prison. There was a deep pain in Roderich that Feliciano could see now, one that matched his wounds from leaving Ludwig.

'It's about Ludwig?' Roderich asked softly. Feliciano nodded, tears in his throat.

*They're going to raid the prison and save him and I'm so scared they're all going to die-*

'Raid?' Roderich clenched his fists. 'No. That's impossible, Feliciano.'

*Francis said they were going to. Him and Alfred.*

They were going to die. The unspoken truth hung between them. Roderich sunk down at the table, shoulders shaking slightly. There was a paler line on the back of his neck, marking a necklace that no longer hung there.

'They can't. Who would be so foolish as to try to... ' He suddenly stilled, eyes wide and full of an endless anguish. Feliciano couldn't look at him when he shakily signed.

*Francis said he was going because he knew someone in the East. Someone who wants to save Ludwig.* The pieces were falling together in his head- the loss, the way Roderich had agreed

so suddenly to anything about Ludwig, the terror in him now- and he didn't want to say it, but he knew that Roderich had to know as well. *His brother. Gilbert.*

There was a heartbeat of stillness, and then Roderich crumpled forward into his hands, a terrible pained noise wrenching out of him, like his whole careful world was crashing down.

Feliciano stood by helplessly. He held out his hands, and Roderich gripped them hard, eyes burning. He was made of sword-steel beneath the silks.

'You know him,' Feliciano said. His voice still startled him. It was still shaky, still showing all the breaks of the prison, something that at least made sense and reflected what had really happened.

'I knew him,' he whispered. His thumb traced a spot on his ring finger that was wearing raw. 'I should have hated him and he should have left me to die, but I didn't. And he saved me.'

'Will he die?' Feliciano asked quietly. Ludwig, and Alfred, and now Gilbert. Roderich let go, elegant again, pain hidden.

'Love is only for the dead and dying,' he said with a bitter smile, more like a grimace of wolf teeth.

*That isn't true,* Feliciano wanted to say, wanted to sing to the starlings in the eaves. Loving Ludwig felt like the most wonderful thing, felt like life itself was whispering the song of creation in their kisses. Berlin was a city of art, and art meant blue sky and blue flowers and blue eyes, art meant kissing goodnight, not goodbye. *Everything is going to be okay,* Ludwig had promised, and it was going to be.

*But it doesn't always have to be that way,* Feliciano signed with shaking hands, smiling back. *Not here.*

## Chapter End Notes

:: Wandering the rooms of a familiar house during evening and listening to people talk outside

# Chapter Sixteen

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Feliciano had thought that the slow loss of hope would kill him, and it almost had. What he *knew* would kill him was if hope was here again, sudden and shining like blue eyes in the sun, and then it was gone forever. That fatal gunshot was dawning, just a few days on the horizon.

The dog Litz sat at his feet, head resting in his lap. Feliciano ran fingers through his short coat, smiling slightly at how well the German shepherd had cleaned up after a few baths and a trip to a groomer. Feliciano hadn't the heart to throw away his battered leather collar, but he'd washed it as well. It felt good, being able to put things together, fix things eaten up by war. It gave Feliciano hope for himself.

*Hope*, what a terrible, dangerous thing. Hope, what a vital thing, as necessary to life here as the stuttering, rushing heartbeat of the streets. But for now, Feliciano let go of hope and opened himself to the sunrise, sitting there with his dog. He was allowed this small, quiet moment, learning how to put himself back together in the face of the world breaking apart. He sat and watched the sun dawning, and the birds of the new day, rubbing the dog's silky ears.

'Things will be okay after this,' he said, just like he had the morning before, wondering if he'd have time to believe it before the raid, because after it he wouldn't have to believe at all.

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Before Feliciano could comprehend the time as anything but a blur, the day of the raid was happening. He'd heard whispers now, slipping through the cracks in the concrete Wall, that *people were making trouble for the Stasi today*, hissed in too much delight and not enough fear. They only knew about faceless revolutionaries fighting faceless soldiers far and removed from the glittering West, not that this was a desperate last gasp, a final lunge to save or lose everything. Today, while he was staying up past midnight, huddled in a chair in his living room, sobbing into the fold of his arms until he coughed up blood. Ready to sink, ready to drown. Today, when he could barely breathe from guilt and anticipation, until it made him sick.

He went back to his art gallery the night before the raid, because there was nothing else to do. Francis wasn't there anymore- *and he might never be again*, a voice whispered, but he ignored it and put on his smile for people he'd once known. His bruises had faded and his scars were hidden. *There was a mistake*, he wrote about his voice, shrugging like it didn't matter, and people accepted it. What he didn't say was that the mistake was believing the gentle man with the brightest blue eyes when he said *everything will be okay after this*. Nothing would ever be okay.



Normal, that's what this was. Normal, like before the Wall. If that was what Ludwig had meant when he'd promised *okay*, Feliciano didn't want any part of it. He wanted Ludwig, he wanted to be safe in his arms and hear him laugh and see him smile, that beautiful expression of fondness and wonder. He wanted Ludwig to be safe and happy like he deserved, like what had been taken from him in those short, aching minutes of standing in a concrete hell.

He locked the door of the back supply closet and screamed silently into his own hands, the noise trapped somewhere between thought and tongue. Screamed until his jaw ached from noiseless tears, screamed until the sob finally tore out of him in a shocking, ragged *sound*. It felt like a victory and a loss all at once. After this it would all be over, and he wouldn't hurt and ache and want anymore. After this, he would be okay. Feliciano would be as empty and as painted with love and loss and war as Berlin itself.

Roderich came to his art gallery that night, when evening was breaking, the sun fading but not gone yet. They didn't need to speak much anymore, there was a quiet understanding. Tonight. Tonight, everything would change.

'I found people who will help,' Roderich told him quietly, and Feliciano followed him to a different part of the city, one he would have frequented more a year ago, before the Wall, when he was happier and wanted a smile and a set of hands that weren't his own for a night.

One of the men had soft purple eyes and a hidden strength in his gaze and the way he held himself. Feliciano had sold a painting to him once. One was holding a bundled fabric under his arm in East guard colours that made Feliciano shudder. The third was strange, fascinating, and made him want to reach for a pencil and draw. His amber eyes were ancient, in an ageless face.

He was too exhausted to do much more than float through listening. Floating, that was a good description for the whole world right now. Caught and suspended in the moment of zero gravity that planes had when they dove, right before everything crashed.

Feliciano mumbled his assent when they asked questions. The man with the old eyes was named *Yao*, and he promised that the three of them would help people through the Wall.

'We need people on this side. People who know how to fix things. They'll be wounded.'

The silent agreement flashed between them. Hospitals meant *records*, and records meant five years in prison for speaking what you wanted and kissing who you loved.

'Tell them that if-' Roderich broke off, pained. 'Tell them that *when* they bring their men through, we have a place for the wounded.' He told him his address.

'Thank you,' Yao said, placing a hand on his arm. 'Do you have anyone who knows how to fix-'

'I can,' Feliciano heard himself say, stumbling forward in the street. The world spun. Roderich turned to him, fresh sorrow on his face.

'Feliciano,' he said.

'I need to,' Feliciano insisted. 'I need to help fix things. Please.'

He knew Roderich would say yes, because he understood. Because they were the same, living with their guilt, and they both had to fix whatever they could to keep themselves from shattering all the way down to bone.

Roderich looked away and nodded, and Feliciano managed something like a smile, tilting his face up to the earliest light, the promise that the darkness would all be over soon. Yao gave instructions to the other two and started walking to the border.

'Where are you going?' Roderich called.

'I am going to fight a battle I never should have left.' Yao tied his hair back as he walked. 'I used to live in the East. I used to help fight.'

'You must think you're invulnerable if you're going back,' Roderich murmured, half-challenging.

'I am not invulnerable in the East,' Yao said, but there was a flash of coppery bright fire in his eyes that made Feliciano believe he was. 'But I am close to it.'

'How?'

'I made a mistake a very long time ago.' Yao pulled his ponytail under his hood, sharpening himself for battle. 'One that follows me to this day. At least I can make him useful.'

Yao walked towards the Wall like a man invulnerable. Roderich placed a hand on Feliciano's arm and led him away, back through the streets.

'You can stay over,' he offered as they drew closer to downtown, for the night the world might end. The night Gilbert would win or lose Berlin, the night an American could die and start the nuclear wars, the day two broken men huddled and listened to the radio crackle through Elvis songs. Waiting, like the ozone taste before lightning, the calm before the storm. Waiting for someone else to tell them it was time to live again. All the jumbled, painful thoughts in Feliciano's head narrowed to a single point. Someone would come through the door or not, with a man who Feliciano could save. And then all these worries would be gone.

Feliciano's hands were raw at the knuckles and nails where he'd been biting. The air seemed to weigh down on his shoulders, forcing down his throat and filling up his lungs. *What comes after this?* What came after, if they lost the city and Ludwig was dead in the streets? What came after knowing he'd lost everything?

Just as the waiting became suffocating, Roderich spoke.

'I loved him,' he said as one of the songs crooned to a close. His eyes were wet as he raised his gaze, hands clenching into fists on the polished table. 'Gilbert. The man who saved me. I love him.'

In an instant, everything Ludwig had ever said about his brother flashed through Feliciano's head. The pain and the resent and the cold *fear*, the *hatred*. Gilbert had hurt Ludwig, and

Feliciano had hated him for it.

Roderich's shoulders were shaking. *I love him*. The fragmented images of Gilbert Beilschmidt fluttered through his head like black winged birds against the early grey morning. Traitor. Lover. Brother.

'Why?' Feliciano asked, because he needed to know, because he knew Roderich needed to tell.

'I shouldn't,' he breathed. The firelight cast deep shadows beneath his eyes. 'He acts like the world is his. He calls- he called me *songbird*, and he is a traitor, and I hate him but I love him. He told me he would save me, and of all his broken promises, he kept that one.' Roderich made a strange choking keening. 'He's beautiful, but I didn't tell him that as often as I should have. He looks like he's been painted by moonlight.'

Feliciano had nightmares about the prison every night, nightmares enough to remember the guard with pale skin and silver hair. The guard who had been there when Ludwig gave himself over. Gilbert Beilschmidt.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry or scream or wrap himself in his arms and never wake back up.

'Ludwig hates him,' he said clearly to the still air. Roderich laughed, ragged and tilting with panic.

'He should.'

'Ludwig said-' Feliciano couldn't speak the words. He signed the ugly shapes instead, about what Gilbert had shouted, praying for Roderich to tell him that he was wrong, that it was all a bad dream.

Roderich didn't.

'Gilbert loves him. Enough to save him. Enough to change the world for him.' The vulnerable love in his expression was gone now. 'Ludwig is still right to hate him.'

There was a breathtaking cruelty in the idea that Ludwig would have lived and died under that eagle's talons. He was more than a prisoner, more than an officer, more than one more soldier for the nuclear wars. How do you love that kind of cruelty, he wanted to ask, but he knew it wasn't that simple. There were hints of love in predatory birds and in men made of shark teeth and steel.

*No kind of hatred is right*, he signed without as much conviction, tongue tripping over the syllables when he tried to say them. Hatred was the cause of all the bad things that had happened- hatred of gentleness and of love and of what people thought was weakness but was in truth unimaginable strength. His head hurt trying to fit Gilbert's hurricane contradictions against the broken man before him.

'This is different,' Roderich said quietly.

*Ludwig shouldn't forgive him*, Feliciano said, and again. *Ludwig deserved better*.

*You deserve better*, he started to say without thinking, but the signs failed when Roderich lifted his head with a glint in his eyes like polished steel. Outside these walls was a fight of artists and lovers with guns. It was easier to think of that fight, simply right and wrong, instead of the complex pieces of human machinery that ran it. Gilbert wasn't as starkly black and white as the birds overhead. Roderich held as much history as the streets did.

*Why?* Feliciano asked again, helpless to do anything but. Roderich turned away, body swaying in a slow dance to death.

'I couldn't help falling in love with him,' he said softly. Feliciano pretended not to see the tear tracks on his cheeks.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Old clothes worn so soft you can barely feel them

# Chapter Seventee

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was no nuclear war in the dark before death. Ludwig wondered why anyone had ever been scared of the dark when it was the light that hurt more: the light of the interrogation room a thousand years ago, the light of the nuclear warheads right before the city was gone. Fear and hate and the future all floated away in the quiet, leaving only the warmth of love and a quiet satisfaction that Gilbert hadn't been right, this wasn't how soldiers died, on the battlefield in their country's colours. This was how the forgotten in history died, sleeping with bloodstains and a smile because they'd saved someone better than them.

Feliciano would remember him as Ludwig, not *Gilbert's baby brother*, not a soldier, not a faceless officer. He was not an artist, he was not a revolutionary. He had loved in dreams and hidden places, he had loved as a war city does. He would die a lover, and that was good enough, because he had grown up fed on blood and survival and war. He had made something better for himself and that was more than enough. What a wonderful thing, to be written in history's gentlest shade of blood.

The gunshots didn't disturb him in his dreams. The blood masking his face like a second skin was nothing. He didn't notice the clattering door or the scrape of knees on the ground or feel hands on his broken body, but he heard the haunting words in the dark:

'Oh, *baby brother*.'

Ludwig pulled the darkness further around himself. Gilbert had taken his life, he wouldn't allow his memory to take his death.

There were hands on him, slipping on the blood on his shoulders, somewhere in a world a million miles away. Ludwig let them happen. They were nothing more than firefly lights flickering in his vision as he drifted back to sleep.

He had been born ruined and by all rights his life was ending in the very beginning of it, a story made of *should have been* and uniforms he didn't want to fit into. It was wrong, wasn't it, all of it? He was too exhausted, bone deep, to be angry that his life was gone.

After all the waiting and the pain, knowing that death was finally coming was like the pressure of his long ago uniform being lifted away. All Ludwig could think was *maybe my death will be one more weapon to pull down the Wall*.

*Oh, Feliciano, sweetheart, Berlin is all yours.*

The pain crashed into him like lightning, splitting through his hollow body like salt water in old wounds, through the sleep. Ludwig couldn't run anymore, couldn't hide away from it, and it woke him from the stupor. They couldn't even let him die without hurting him one more

time. Gilbert had made one more fatal mistake and they'd dragged him in and they were killing him, right now, for Gilbert *always for Gilbert living and dying and fighting for him-*

Sight and sound and pain flooded back, the world returned. Ludwig gasped, chest burning, tasting salt, struggling for oxygen, head blurry, mind blurrier, registering everything and nothing at all. Blood. Pain. His shattered body. The echoes of a dream, a long dream while he was waiting for death. Birdsong, music in a prison; the blur in front of him had red copper eyes and a shark smile. Everything hurt, everything was so raw and scraped down to his broken bones, alive in all the worst ways just like before.

'Baby brother,' Gilbert said, those *fucking words* that haunted and chased him through the wartorn streets. His scarred hand touched Ludwig's jaw, and he whispered, 'I'm here to save you.'

The words boiled up in Ludwig and he *spat* them out with blood and hatred and twenty years of not living at all.

'I would rather die here than be saved by you,' he snarled, slurred out. For a lucid moment, Ludwig saw his brother's shocked, broken expression, and he loved it, he sang in that moment.

The pain pressed down relentlessly. Ludwig didn't know if he could even move some of his limbs, if they'd broken him entirely or if the pain held him so tightly that he couldn't. If he couldn't move now or never again, that was the question that danced in fragments around his echoing head. The concrete walls moving by blurred into Gilbert's pale skin. *Your weapon's broken now*, Gilbert, Ludwig managed to think through the bright lances of pain, reveling in his vindication. *Your weapon fell in love and learned how to be kind, your weapon's half dead and so alive with love and he's never going to shoot to kill again.*

Pain and the awareness of movement through the prison, that was all that existed. Every sensation felt new again, like he had been reborn. There was too much light, too much pain, he was raw with the world. Light was everywhere- it's like crossing into heaven, Ludwig thought, and knew he wasn't dead yet because they sent men like him to hell, him and Gilbert. Sound crashed against him like riptide waves. He could feel his heart pounding, stuttering, unsure if it was still alive or if it wanted to be. The future didn't matter when there was pain and light and sound.

Under the light, he found the summer sky blue, and from a life long ago he remembered the shade. It caught in him like a hook to the present, and the name rose up from the dark shark-water of his mind.

'Alfred,' his mouth said, around the blood, and the face among the eyes resolved itself into *American pilot*.

'Yes, yes-' His love and fear and hope for heroism were written all over him. It was good, loving like that. 'I had to.'

Ludwig managed to catch the red thread of the future for just a second and thought, *if there is life after this I want to love as openly as that.*

Alfred ran for the Wall and was gone. Far away, Ludwig sorted out the sounds of shouting and gunshots from the incomprehensible weight of noise. They were far away, though. All that existed right now was Gilbert's molten heat against his side. There was blood staining his uniform. Ludwig's blood. Here was the eye of the hurricane.

Gilbert slowly let go of him, and Ludwig steadied himself against the concrete of the Wall. The chill seeped into his skin. He looked up and-

Gilbert was crying. He had Ludwig's blood on his face and new silvery scars and a delicate chain necklace to match. He looked like everything unnecessary to his very existence as Gilbert had been burned away and this was all that was left. And there were tears on his face, streaking down through the bright blood like the patterns raindrops made on windows.

There was something obscene and fundamentally wrong about seeing him this way. Ludwig didn't think Gilbert was capable of crying any more than he was capable of love. It made him wary, watching the thing that was his brother like a wild hurt animal that only knew teeth and pain.

'I saved you,' Gilbert said, more to himself than to Ludwig. He clutched the chain necklace and to his surprise Ludwig saw that the end was a simple, polished wooden cross. He pressed it once to his lips and raised his eyes, the maelstrom within raging, always at high tide. That, at least, was familiar.

'You heard what I said,' Ludwig rasped, voice hoarse. Blood dripped from his teeth, from his tongue, from the tips of his fingers. Drying against his skin. Making a tight mask on his face. He noticed how Gilbert flinched, just barely, when he spoke. He noticed all the breaks in him, and didn't know if they were new or if they'd always been there without him being able to see.

'I had to. It's you.'

'No,' Ludwig said, his long-dreaming rage rising. He knew, *he knew who he was now*. 'It's *you*, Gilbert. You wanted your weapon back, you wanted your precious *baby brother*-' He bared his teeth in rage and power at the way Gilbert jerked back. 'You wanted everything to go back to the way it used to be. It's gone. It's gone because you did this, you did *all* of this,' gesturing at his broken body, god damn right he could still be a weapon because Gilbert had fear in his eyes from looking at the monstrous thing Ludwig had made of himself. 'I'm different now, Gilbert. You can't hurt me anymore. I never want to see you again.'

In the silence after his words, Ludwig swayed. He'd taken that last line right from Gilbert, and they both knew it. Ludwig had won. Ludwig had broken him, and all he felt was exhausted, exhausted of how much of his life had been stolen. He was free, and he still had so far to go.

'You've grown up,' Gilbert said to the quiet. Ludwig didn't bother with a response. 'I'm different now as well,' he added, light as prison birdsong. His thumb wore at the cross.

'How?'

His teeth flicked out in nothing like his wolf smile. Ludwig had won and it didn't feel good. It felt sad, bitter, like watching an eagle fall from the sky with limp wings.

'I saved someone. I loved them, too.'

Soldiers weren't supposed to love, and maybe it was because of this reason: it turned a monster into a man and a man into a monster.

Gilbert stood, all his wildness gone. He looked like a man instead of a hurricane. He looked like someone who could have, should have been Ludwig's brother.

'All of it was for you. Everything I did. It was wrong, though.'

That apology was the most Ludwig would get, he knew. His head was light, floating away.

'I wish you could see who I'd be in the future,' he said.

'I think I've always known.' Gilbert helped him up and Ludwig leaned against him as the guard door was opened.

'I'll miss you,' Gilbert said once it was open. The West blurred through the gap. Ludwig didn't realize it fully until too late, and the world shifted again.

'You're not-?'

'I'm staying in the East,' he said. The words settled in.

Ludwig had to look at him again, the new scars and the pain and the wild-comet of him burning softer and steadier, and realize that this would be the last time he would see his brother alive. This thing that was and was not Gilbert, that knew too much of love. Something had changed in him. *Berlin did that to people*, but not to Gilbert. Berlin was his.

But the truth was that something had changed in both of them, and now they were standing at the end of the world, in the burned corpses of who they used to be, with not enough time to learn each other again.

They were running out of time. Gilbert took Ludwig's weight again, through the guard door in the Wall. He'd thought his life had been slipping away without him living it when he was lying dead in the prison, but it was happening again now. He was alive and he didn't know what was left of him if Gilbert was changed so much.

Maybe, maybe he was his own man now. Maybe he could live for better things.

In the steps before their lives finally split, Ludwig stopped and looked Gilbert in the eyes and told him the truth.

'His name is Feliciano Vargas. He's an artist. He's kind and he taught me that there was more to the world than what I'd been shown. I love him for his gentleness and his bravery and his smile. He is worth the world and I love him.'



Gilbert smiled. 'I know.'

He touched Ludwig's shoulder, ghosting over the open wounds in silent apology, and Ludwig saw how Gilbert had woken him in the pain in his eyes. There was twenty years between them and all they had was a minute.

'I'm so *proud* of you, Ludwig,' Gilbert murmured. Ludwig's brother's eyes were the dawning red of the morning sky. Then the Wall was between them and he was gone forever.

Hands caught him, people caught him, talking and moving, all incomprehensible except for the return of a steady warmth against Ludwig's side. Alfred. He was talking too, but Ludwig didn't hear anything except for *Feliciano*, his musical name being repeated.

'Feliciano,' he said wonderingly, only now realizing that they could be reunited. Sleep was coming to take him again, but that was okay. Things were going to be okay, just like he'd promised.

Somehow everything had turned out right, in the ashes of a broken man, broken city, in this broken country there was healing.

'Stay awake,' Alfred was repeating, '-for Feliciano, for Feliciano.'

*Everything I have ever done is for him*, Ludwig wanted to sing, sing like the starlings and the artists about all the promises he'd made and kept.

'Liebling,' he promised one more time, to the artist who had shown him that he was more than this. To the world held in his hands. He was going to see Feliciano again, he was following the golden thread and going home. It was okay to rest now.

Everything, everything was going to be okay, liebling, sweetheart, *as long as I have you*.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Reciting poetry to an empty room, just to hear the words take shape

# Chapter Eighteen

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the dark, in the dawning red morning, in the stillness, the scar in the city broke open. Feliciano was waiting for it, wide eyed and awake, watching the stars wink out like angels falling. *Please*, he thought, too achingly lonely and exhausted with the effort of hoping to think of anything but that. *Please, Ludwig*.

The kinds of people who ran to Berlin were those who deserved nothing and wanted the world. People left behind in the cracks of history's concrete where the wildflowers grew, the artists and the lovers and the soldiers with no war left to fight but themselves. Feliciano hoped like he always did that the world would be kind, and that he and Ludwig would be allowed to watch the blue morning, would be allowed that gentler life they'd promised each other. He prayed in the only ways he knew how, that things would be okay. *Please*.

When they brought him in, Feliciano thought he was dead. In the rushing flutter of people, like the scattering flight of birds, a man lay there on the table. Still and sleeping and dripping in blood.

The world narrowed to a point, all colour and light focused on him. The angle of his jaw, the lines of his face starved and bruised but so, so familiar. Feliciano had drawn and painted and dreamed of him. Ludwig.

A terrible, wonderful noise of hope and pain and *love*, of all the months waiting and fearing and longing, clawed out of him, and he rushed towards the table, cradling Ludwig's face in his hands. Someone grabbed onto him, saying something, but suddenly Roderich was there and they were gone. Feliciano barely noticed. The only thing that existed was this house full of the earliest sunlight and Ludwig, beautiful, perfect Ludwig, saved, and the world was right again. Beneath Feliciano's trembling fingers was a pulse, slow and stuttering but alive. As long as he was alive, Feliciano would do everything and anything to save him. He had hope, solid and breathing under his hands.

'*Mio caro*,' he whispered, shaking, shaking apart, tears spilling down his face and dripping onto Ludwig's wounds, the word soft and gentle, easy and perfect to say. '*Liebling*, Ludwig. I'm here. I'm here and everything will be okay now.'

'Let him,' he heard Roderich say behind him, voice soft. 'He's Feliciano.'

When the doctors crowded around, they left a space for him. He washed the blood away from his skin, away from the cuckoo tattoo swirling across his shoulder blade, relief and horror warring within him at the bruises, at the wounds. Tears stung his eyes at the ragged marks on his shoulders. There was so much blood. Too much. Ludwig breathed, and his heart beat, but he didn't wake.

'Is he going to...' Feliciano couldn't voice the thought. He couldn't. After all of this, after everything, Ludwig couldn't die. Not here, when there were people to take care of him. Not when their future was breathing at their fingertips. He refused to believe it.

'He's been pushed past what anyone should have to endure,' one of the doctors said. Panic filled Feliciano's throat, cutting off all his words. *He'll wake up*, he signed and mouthed instead.

'He's a survivor,' the doctor said gently. 'But he's been through a lot.'

*He has to wake up. We can't lose him. None of this was his fault*, Feliciano pleaded, eyes prickling with the terrifying indifference of death, which didn't care for fault or love or hope. *It was all my fault*.

The doctors turned back to the body on the table, trying to patch the battlefield of his body, the blood and bone record of all the war that Berlin held. Feliciano had felt his pulse, he had seen him breathe, traced the lines of his face. Ludwig couldn't be dead. He couldn't. Feliciano couldn't have him this close before everything fell down. He refused to leave all his love declarations unspoken. He would not be a tragedy. Their kind of love deserved peace after the wars.

When he tried to say that, all his love and fear and pain, it tangled up and spilled out in a horrible, choking noise. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He wasn't supposed to be terrified of the future anymore.

Roderich came for him. He held him tight, tight enough that both of them could fall apart, and Feliciano sobbed, sobbed and screamed into the warm silence of Roderich's chest over everything he hoped and wished, over fault and the body breathing but asleep on the table. He sobbed until he was completely empty and floating. He was too exhausted to fight any longer.

Someone put him to bed, and he dreamed of Ludwig waking up and laughing, all his wounds healed, and the world was brighter.

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When he woke, it was bright and someone was singing. He thought he recognized the song, similar to the Elvis song he'd played on record so long ago, and he thought he recognized the voice. He sat up, body still aching, wrung-out and exhausted from the turmoil.

'Alfred?'

The voice immediately cut off, silent and guilty. Feliciano squinted into the light and saw the pilot with a pen in hand, hunched over by the desk.

'Don't tell Evan,' Alfred immediately blurted. 'I'm not supposed to be out of bed.'

'I won't...won't tell.'

Alfred gave a little half-smile. 'It's still hard to talk?'

He gave a thumbs up and tried a smile.

'I get that. We've all been through hell. My side still hurts if I move too much.' Alfred's grin faltered for a moment. 'Maybe I can get sent home early. Damaged goods don't fly.'

*You're awake*, Feliciano observed, trying to ignore the pang in his heart when he thought of Ludwig- *sleeping and breathing and nothing more-*

He curled up, pulling his knees to his chest and tucking the blankets around him. Alfred set down his letter and limped over, wincing and clutching his side.

'Shrapnel got me,' he explained, sitting down and swinging his legs up. Feliciano shuffled close to him, alive and bright, and could only think of Ludwig. It wasn't Alfred's fault. He'd done everything he could.

*Thank you for what you did*, he signed.

'Yeah.' Alfred pressed his lips together, staring off into the distance. 'It's good. It was- it was what I *needed* to do. For Ludwig.'

*Ludwig*, Feliciano repeated. Alfred read his lips and his brows furrowed at the shorthand sign Feliciano had created- *I love you*, pressed to his chest.

'That means him?' he asked softly. Feliciano nodded. 'Thought so. It made sense.'

*He's not waking up*. It was easier to talk to Alfred. He'd been through it. He understood.

'He will,' Alfred said, completely confidently save for his shaking hand, curled into a fist. 'He's got to.'

*Where is he?* Feliciano suddenly sat upright. *I have to see him-*

'They moved him.' Alfred held up a hand, grimacing in sympathy. 'I know. He's getting treated at a proper place. Someone pulled a few strings to get him there, and he needs it. You...' He trailed off, and anguish flashed in his eyes. 'You saw what they did to him?'

*I saw.*

They sat together in the sunlight, lost in their own heads but anchored in each other.

*He deserves to wake up.*

'I know.' Alfred worried at a ragged piece of paper, staring into a different time. His voice was soft. The East had worn at his lightning-sharp energy. 'People like us- we tend to hurt more than we should.'

Feliciano nodded at his paper questioningly, hoping to change the topic, and Alfred brightened. 'These are my poems! Artie copied them down for me.' He carefully unfolded the page and traced the carefully inked words with reverence. 'Keats' poetry. It's beautiful. This is

my good luck charm, you know,' he said. 'I want to tattoo them on me, like Evan. He's got his art, and I've got mine.' He beamed.

Alfred shone when he spoke about Arthur, so happy and sure of his love. All Feliciano could do for Ludwig was hold on, hold on and hope.

'Feli?'

He looked up. Alfred smiled. He had changed. Not in the way that the prison changed people, but in a glowing way. He'd gone through his hell and he was healing.

'Thank you,' Alfred said. 'This is your city, and I only know a little bit of it. I came here for nuclear warfare- I can't even imagine doing that now. I don't know Berlin entirely, but I fell in love with it. With Arthur.' He gazed back at his poems. 'I might be going soon, so can you do something for me? When Ludwig wakes up, can you tell him that...that everything is okay now?'

Tears filled his throat as he nodded. Alfred leaned against him, and they watched the sunlight slide slowly across the bedsheets.

'Things will be okay,' Alfred repeated before he got up and limped back to his own bed, pulling the covers up and winking at him just before one of the doctors, the one with bright green hair, came in.

'Was he out of bed?' the man asked Feliciano. Alfred widened his eyes innocently.

'Evan! You don't trust me?'

'No.'

*He was in bed the whole time*, Feliciano mouthed in agreement, and Alfred grinned, and the whole world felt a little bit more right.

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They brought Ludwig back in the evening a few days later, while Feliciano was cleaning a landscape of bruising and shrapnel lacerations, purple-blue-red like thunderstorms. His hands were occupied, but the woman understood the words he mouthed well enough. It was almost a kind of normal, meeting people and trying to fix them as much as he could. She spoke about her partner, and about the Wall, and grinned when Feliciano talked about his art.

When Ludwig came back, it wasn't with rush and panic. It was quiet, and simple, and in the touch of the woman's hand to his shoulder and the gentle statement:

'He's yours, isn't he.'

Feliciano let go and rose, believing, not wanting, not *daring* to believe, but Ludwig was there and he looked alive. Sleeping but alive, bandaged and breathing.

'He's stable,' one of the doctors said. Feliciano recognized his voice, and looked up in shock to see Evan. He looked exhausted and alight, the glowing, grinning pride that came with doing the right thing. Feliciano had felt like that after his hands ached after a painting, after he captured the shimmer of skin just right, after he kissed a piece of this city and made the memory into paint and blue eyes. Doing what he did best.

'He's yours,' Evan said, eyes crinkling with a smile. 'I'll take care of your patient. I think your lover will wake up soon.'

*Lover*, the word sang through him like a promise. Feliciano could barely manage a *thank you* before he was following the procession into the bedroom. They laid Ludwig down and left him and Feliciano alone.

Feliciano slipped his hand into Ludwig's. Bandages laced up his forearm and spread across his collarbone. He was a soldier, a fighter, but he was not only that. He was Feliciano's lover, and that was something beautiful.

In that glowing dark bedroom with Ludwig, the words came easier, in his hands and his voice. It was like all the times his words had been paralyzed had been in preparation for this, where his words spilled out faster than he could think, like honeyed wine and love.

'I love you. I missed you so much, I thought you were dead, I would have never forgiven myself if you were dead. I love you, Ludwig, *mio caro*, my dearest. I love you so much. You save me. You're so much gentler than you know. I wish you could see yourself how I do, I wish you knew how beautiful you are, how much you mean to me. You gave me the world, *liebbling*. You saved me.' He leaned forward and pressed a trembling kiss to his lips, warm with breath. 'Let me save you too.'

He stayed by Ludwig's side as the sun sank, as the red and golden light filtered through the curtains into their private sanctuary. Nothing could hurt them here. The world, Berlin, was all held back. The only thing that existed in this bedroom was warm love.

'I love you,' Feliciano whispered as the stars glimmered outside, kissing the bandages crossing his forearm. He kept Ludwig's hand in his as he traced his way up his body, whispering his love in every language he knew. They found their way into a song, their song.

*Then I'll have everything, as long as I have you...*

Feliciano kissed his collarbone, his chest, the place in his neck where his pulse beat steady. He kissed his brow. The lamp on the table lit him gold as if he was poured from it, as if this was something holy. It felt holy. It felt like prayer fulfilled as Feliciano kissed the corner of his mouth, where he'd seen Ludwig's quirking, adoring looks, seen the curl of his smile.

Ludwig's hand tightened in his, barely a flutter. Feliciano's heart stuttered in his chest, breaking and healing and not daring to believe, not yet. He couldn't dare.

He raised his eyes and met wide-awake *blue*, as beautiful as the day they'd met, and the world *sang*.

'Liebling,' Ludwig murmured, and in that word was the world, and so much love he wanted to drown in it. Feliciano sobbed or laughed or screamed or something between them all and held onto him as tight as he could. He hurt, he hurt and sang because everything, everything was right now. His heart was thrumming, and he could feel Ludwig's steady, bird-fast pulse.

'Ludwig,' Feliciano gasped. He tasted salt and love. Ludwig laughed, raspy and soft, but beautiful, beautiful, and held him tight. 'Ludwig, *mio caro, ti amo*, oh God, oh *God*.'

'Feliciano,' Ludwig whispered adoringly, drawing him close, hands familiar, so familiar, guiding him into a kiss. Feliciano kissed him deep, like a prayer, like a love declaration. 'I promised, *mein Schatz*. I promised you everything, everything would be okay.'

Feliciano was choking on his tears, laughing with the wonderfulness of it all, the singing love in this glowing bedroom. Ludwig had promised him the future, and they would have it. A world free of the ghosts of soldiers and nuclear warheads. A world where they didn't have to be scared of falling, where they could love and be loved and be remembered by their kisses rather than their wars. A world where Feliciano could say *ich liebe dich* and *ti amo* like the promises they were.

Ludwig kissed him again, as Berlin glowed outside the window, breaking and healing and wonderfully alive. They had scars and history, but they would heal. They would turn their scars into art, in the future.

'*Ich liebe dich*,' Ludwig said, like a promise. Feliciano thought he could hear music, winding through the bright streets like the golden thread that tied them together, the one that led Ludwig back home.

'Say that again,' he pleaded, feeling like he'd spill over with all his love, and Ludwig did.

The world could sometimes be cold, but long as they had each other they'd be warm.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Sitting together with the people you've found as family, laughing and talking and comfortable

# Chapter Nineteen

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They had all the time in the world to themselves in that sunny paradise. There was war outside, but Feliciano could forget it when he was in Ludwig's arms, when the only memory of them was the wounds on his back. He barely dared to touch them, but Ludwig laughed- oh, his laugh was beautiful- and took his hands.

'It's okay,' he said. His voice was still hoarse with effort, but he glowed like Feliciano had never seen before. 'You can touch.'

'I don't want to hurt you,' Feliciano said. Ludwig's heart was steady and comforting, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life hearing it.

'You don't hurt, Feliciano.' He brushed his hair back from his forehead. The gentle action made tears sting at his eyes. 'I'll be okay.'

There was intimacy in this healing, in clean white bandages and Ludwig learning signs, in the slow melding of all their languages of love. German and Italian and fingertips on paint-stained skin. They learned the world that lay on the other side of the concrete hell, and the way Berlin had changed them both. Ludwig looked alive and so, so beautiful, so much that Feliciano could barely concentrate on showing him the paintings he'd done or the things he wanted to do once Ludwig was better. He wanted to kiss him, and he *could*, and he did. Ludwig tasted like sunlight.

Feliciano was working on his bandages one night when he saw the shape of the cuckoo, the swirled lines of feathers and eye interrupted by his new scars. Feliciano carefully traced the ink beneath his skin.

'I talked to Gilbert,' Ludwig said. The mention of him cast a pallor over the sunny room. Feliciano didn't know what to do except draw his fingers through the curves and valleys of muscle on Ludwig's back, writing *what did he say?*

Ludwig was quiet. The sun made patterns on his shoulders.

'He said he was proud of me,' he said. 'I don't think it matters now.'

'It doesn't.' Feliciano drew circles between his shoulder blades. 'You look happier now. Away from him.'

'I am.' Ludwig pulled him into his arms, the movement easy and relaxed. 'I'm better without him, I think.'

*I know you are*, he signed. Feliciano leaned up to kiss him, wanting to banish every trace of Gilbert from the room. From their lives. 'You look like you're glowing.'



Ludwig smiled, just as surprising and incredible as the first time. Feliciano thought he was falling in love with him all over ago. 'I am?'

'You're the most beautiful person I've ever seen.' His heart was beating faster. He reached up and kissed the corner of Ludwig's mouth, lingering just long enough to feel his heart speed up the same way. He drew the words on Ludwig's broad chest, hands shaking slightly. *Can I paint you?*

Ludwig's gaze caught him and held, the brightest and clearest blue he'd ever seen.

'Unless-' Feliciano could barely get the words out. He wanted, he wanted so much. 'Unless it's too strenuous- you should rest-'

'I think I'll survive,' Ludwig whispered, and gave him a grin just as wild as the city. 'How about you?'

Feliciano had no words in any language, spoken or signed, to express how much he wanted it, but he knew Ludwig understood in every gasp and plead Feliciano made. It was slow and warm and everything he'd ever wanted, lost in the waves of their bodies. It was everything.

'Ludwig,' Feliciano gasped, holding onto the sheets, to Ludwig, to the gentle tone of his voice, anything to keep from being swept away. '*Ludwig!*'

'I'm right here,' he promised, taking him slow and so, so gentle, every movement aching with love. 'You're so beautiful, I love you. I love you, Feliciano. You're so good.'

'I love you,' Feliciano repeated. He'd fallen in love with this so long ago, the warmth beneath the soldier's shell, the love that held on through the cold. Ludwig had promised him that everything would be okay. Ludwig had given him the future in this sunny room, in the slow worship of their movements together, cresting the waves. 'I love you!'

Ludwig kissed him, their bodies swaying together. Feliciano could hear their hearts beating so fast they melded into a single sound of love. The world sang.

'Liebling,' Ludwig murmured, and took him in hand until Feliciano fell apart shaking, eyelashes wet with overwhelmed love, pleading for him, *thank you thank you*, and they rode out their highs together, warm and safe. Ludwig felt like home.

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Feliciano heard Alfred in the hall before he opened the door, and jumped up. Ludwig sat up in interest, and Feliciano nodded, signing their shorthand for *it's okay*.

He had been worried that it would be awkward, but that all melted away as soon as he saw the pilot. He was familiar. He had walked through the same hell they had.

'Alfred!'

'Feli! Are you doing okay? Is Ludwig-' He glanced around the room, tense to the point of breaking, and stopped when he saw Ludwig in the bed.

'Alfred,' Ludwig said, and Alfred's tension melted away until he collapsed on the bed.

'Ludwig, I'm sorry. I should have said no. I should have thought- should have, for Feli-'

Feliciano could see the panic twisting up in knots. He signed at Ludwig, *tell him*.

Ludwig took his hand. Feliciano could see the conflict in his eyes. This sunny room wasn't a place to speak about old wounds and Gilbert, but it was what Alfred needed to hear, and maybe what Feliciano needed as well.

'You did the right thing. You did something incredibly brave, and I can't thank you enough for it.'

Alfred stared at him with wide, gleaming eyes. 'I should have been braver.'

Feliciano took his other hand, imagining he could feel all the history there. Pilot's joysticks and pale blond hair and another man's uniform. 'You did all you could,' he said. 'It's okay. I forgive you.'

There was nothing to forgive. Berlin ate you alive, twisted everything you knew, and remade you sharper and different. Feliciano knew who was to blame, and he was in a Stasi uniform on the far side of the Wall. Here, their lives wove together in the beautifully messy, human way of love.

'I forgive you,' Ludwig repeated. Feliciano leaned against him and let Alfred put himself back together, wiping at his eyes. He sat back on the bed, wavering slightly, and looked between them.

Alfred was never one to hide his emotions. The grin on his face made Feliciano feel light. They all knew, they all understood. They could be free in this safe room. Alfred swung his legs on the side of the bed, gazing out at the world.

'Ludwig, your Bundesgrenzschutz. How are you going to explain where you've been?'

Ludwig laughed, light as birds in the rafters. 'I'm leaving them. I'm done with war.'

It was so, so lovely to hear those words and see Ludwig as the man he was outside of the uniform of war: the kind, gentle man who said *yes* to artists on the late train and walked through hell for love.

Alfred's eyes were bright, suddenly tense with his endless energy rather than with pain. 'I think- I think I'm doing that too. To hell with my command.'

'To hell with command,' Feliciano repeated. He loved the way the words tasted

Alfred's grin widened, and he leaped up. He looked like kinetic energy and love itself. 'To hell with my command! The best things I've ever done, the only things I'm proud of here, they were all when I defied the command to prepare for a nuclear war. Arthur, and being happy with him, and saving good men- none of that came from them.'

He looked good. He looked happy. Feliciano and Ludwig had collided with the sunlit American's wild comet of a life, loved and lost beside him, and now they flew together. It was strange, the kinds of people you fell in love with in a city like this.

'Maybe we'll meet again in Berlin, once the Wall is gone. Once the wars are all done,' Ludwig offered.

'That would be nice.' Alfred turned to the window, towards the faraway white cliffs of England. 'Once this whole damn thing is done.'

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Ludwig had never felt more alive than when he was lying in bed with Feliciano. He didn't know how he was *allowed* this, to be laying next to this angel, to be allowed to have him for the rest of their lives.

He didn't want to think about it, because in his past all the paths spiraled back to Gilbert Beilschmidt. The future was bright and sunlit and warm, and he could choose to learn gentleness and art and Feliciano in every way. It was terrifying. All he'd known of himself was Gilbert's baby brother, the officer, the golden boy.

Feliciano smiled in his sleep. Ludwig could count the freckles on his cheeks, like constellations. He could become someone else someday, someone who knew kindness as well as this artist did. He had the rest of his life to heal, and that gripped him with awe. He could heal. He had a life now.

It was safe here, and warm. He still couldn't believe it, sometimes, but when he woke from the nightmares Feliciano was there to hold him and tell him *things will be okay*. He knew those words in his musical voice, and he knew them traced across his palm. They hummed beneath his skin.

Feliciano was all golds and ambers and warmth. Here, the spectre of Gilbert stayed further away. Here, the pain could be shared, and the nightmares faded back when he woke. Here, it was okay to touch and love as openly as he'd always feared.

Feliciano greeted him excitedly. Ludwig lay still and grappled with the turmoil.

'Francis?' he asked hesitantly. He looked like he still had Gilbert's hands on him. He looked like Ludwig saw himself.

For a moment, they regarded each other, two of the only people in the world who Gilbert Beilschmidt had cared for. *Look at where we are now*, Ludwig thought.

'I'm sorry,' Francis began surprising him. 'For Gilbert. For not being there for you. I was your brother's best friend, I should have been able to stop-' He nodded to the bandages, eyes overbright.

'Gilbert isn't your fault.' He chose his words carefully. Navigating the past still scarred with war was painful.

'I saw your brother in the East.'

Gilbert's voice in his ear, *I'm so proud of you*. 'I did too.'

'I'm free of him now.' Francis' words brought him back, away from the Wall. He smiled, still war-broken and unsteady, but maybe healing. 'I...realized things about myself. I'd like to make things right with you, if I could. If you'd forgive me.'

That was why Ludwig saw himself in this gentler man. They were both healing from Gilbert's past. It was hard to see Francis without seeing his brother first, harder to look in the mirror without seeing the same.

'I will,' he said. In the future, he would be able to.

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Ludwig healed. He learned to move around again, to sign as fluently as Feliciano, and to move forward. He'd promised Feliciano the future, after all.

They both still had their bad days. Sometimes Feliciano couldn't speak at all, too hemmed in by guilt. Some days Ludwig couldn't bear to look in the mirror and see scars and copper eyes and a life planned for him by someone who didn't know love. Grief wound through their lives, but they had the future, and some day things would be better. As the weeks and months passed and summer came shining in, things were better.

'I don't like seeing you in bandages,' Feliciano said, sitting with him on the garden bench and tracing fingertips over his shoulder blade. He spelled out their promise there: *I love you, ti amo*.

'It's only for a little while.' Ludwig leaned over and fixed the collar of his paint-stained shirt.

'It's too long. I could have painted it myself, you know.' Feliciano gave him a bright look, eyes golden in the sunlight. 'I mean, I did paint the original, but I could have done it better than they did.'

'And how could you have done that?' Ludwig teased. Feliciano gave him a slow smile, and he coughed and looked away.

'I'll take the bandages off soon.'

Feliciano hummed, and it wound up in the branches with the calling birds, weaving into a song they loved.

'*Every kiss brings a thrill, and I know that it will, as long as I have you*,' Feliciano sang, his hands moving to complete the song. Ludwig closed his eyes and tilted his face to the sunlight. It was peaceful here.

The cuckoo on his back held a bouquet of cornflowers now, the petals hiding the words *ti amo* and *ich liebe dich* and a thousand other promises they'd made to each other.

'I love you, lieblich,' Ludwig murmured. Feliciano signed the lyrics like flowers and bright art on concrete and leaned into him, fitting perfectly.

'I love you too.'

They glowed together, bright with art, and Ludwig loved it.

## Chapter End Notes

:: Watching songbirds during spring, singing to each other and learning to fly

# Chapter Twenty

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### *Italian countryside, 1970s*

Berlin was an artist's city. Berlin was a war city. Berlin was Gilbert Beilschmidt's city, and Ludwig loved and loathed it all in one, the city that held all of his past and fears and wishes.

It didn't hold his future. That belonged to this little cottage in the Italian countryside, where the skies were blue and orange and gold but never half as pretty as Feliciano's eyes or the way his hair feathered on the pillow. Ludwig laid awake as the sun began to rise and warm sun began to paint Feliciano's cheeks. It gilded everything, the curve of his nose and his long eyelashes and the scars beneath his loose shirt. His heart beat steady, and he devoted every beat and breath to the beautiful man beside him in their bed, in their house. His future was Feliciano's now.

He leaned over and pressed a careful kiss to his temple. Feliciano's eyes fluttered open, liquid gold in the sun.

'Guten morgen,' he whispered, voice hoarse and adoring. He opened his arms, and Ludwig wrapped him in an embrace.

'Buongiorno, meine liebe,' he responded. Feliciano giggled and nosed against his neck, breathing softly. His skin was warm and he glowed with happiness. They stayed tangled up in each other, kissing and indulging in the delicious sensation of their own love. Feliciano traced endearments on Ludwig's shoulder blades and breathed a lovely, lazy whine when Ludwig kissed his neck.

'Ludwig,' he teased. His eyes looked like the sun. 'We have to clean up today.'

Ludwig left one last kiss on his cheek and sat up to get his shirt. 'I did a lot of cleaning yesterday.'

'Then you can stay in bed with me,' Feliciano said immediately, and Ludwig just laughed.

'Not today, lieblich.'

They cleaned their little house together, adjusting Feliciano's paintings on the walls and moving his paints out of the living room. Feliciano signed *help* at him across the house, trying to hold his paintbrushes in his mouth, and Ludwig laughed and went to take them. Their dogs darted between their legs, tails wagging happily as Feliciano sang. Ludwig bent to rub the German shepherd's ears.

'Hello, Berlitz,' he said. The dog nuzzled his palm, cold nose and warm fur. Berlitz and Feliciano and his memories were all he had left of Gilbert's city now. He still couldn't believe

they'd found him again, battered nametag and all. He kept the best of Berlin here, and had flown from the rest.

And he was wonderfully, warmly, endlessly happy.

Feliciano pulled him into a dance around their kitchen, between buckets of soapy water and unfinished paintings.

'Sing?' he asked, and of course, of course Ludwig said yes. He sang their song, voice still breaking on the high notes, but he couldn't care at all because Feliciano was laughing and happy and shining in the kitchen of the home they shared.

'Ich liebe dich,' Ludwig murmured, pressing their foreheads together. Feliciano kissed him, sweet and warm and everything he'd ever wanted. He wished, God, he wished he could have him in every way.

'Ti amo, Ludwig.'

Elizabeta and Emma arrived first, and Roderich a few minutes later. Ludwig couldn't keep his eyes away from him. This was the man who loved his brother, and the idea of it still made his chest ache. He held onto Feliciano's hand as he enthusiastically greeted everyone. The food was excellent and the wine was better, and they laughed and shared stories of their lives beyond the Wall. This was it, the living proof that they had survived the Wall and they could continue to survive in a world where they were friends and not lovers in public. Elizabeta cast a glance at Ludwig across the table and then to Feliciano, draped halfway in his lap.

'You two fit each other,' she said softly, taking Emma's hand. Ludwig remembered the letter he'd sent her, pouring out his wish that he could one day stand before Feliciano's priests and marry him, and wanted it so much it was painful.

They did fit each other. They had their arguments, their stormy days when they couldn't struggle out of the waves of their past, but the sunny days were longer and brighter and better now, and they could hold onto each other through the storms.

Roderich was watching them. Ludwig caught his eyes, and saw all of the pain and longing and the past caught in violet.

While Feliciano talked to Elizabeta, Ludwig slipped into the other room and sat down near Roderich. He raised his eyes from his hands and moved to give him space.

'I know you will not want to hear this,' he said, 'But you look like him. You look like him, if he had made all better choices.'

Ludwig had spent years barely thinking of his brother. He'd thought of painting and the bakery he had in town and the wonder of being with Feliciano, and he was better for it.

'Tell me,' he said, because he was still Gilbert Beilschmidt's brother.

'The first choice he shouldn't have made is saving me,' Roderich said. He was smiling faintly. 'The second is letting me fall in love with him. The third was keeping his promises.'

'Gilbert doesn't keep his promises,' Ludwig said. The name almost stung on his tongue, after so long not speaking it.

'He doesn't,' Roderich agreed. 'He promised he'd keep me safe. That he'd make me happy. He never kept those, but he promised me he would return me to the West, and he did.'

They sat in the half-dark. Lamplight danced on Roderich's cheekbones. Ludwig could hear Feliciano speaking softly in the other room, bright and warm, and it was with a strange release that he realized that this proved it: Gilbert's love had no sway over him now. He had new loves, better loves.

'Tell me,' he said again, more confident now, and with a shuddering sigh, Roderich did.

'Gilbert Beilschmidt is the bravest and worst man I have ever met. He is brash and coarse and loving until the end, and I made the mistake of falling in love with that.' Tears stained his cheeks, but he made no move to wipe them away. 'I couldn't help it, and neither could he. I loved him in the way you love something you shouldn't have. I love him still.'

'I understand,' Ludwig said.

'Take care of Feliciano,' Roderich said. 'He and you deserve better. Show him that you love him,' he said fiercely.

They were as different as art and war, and barely different at all. Ludwig rose and held out his hand. He understood what it was like to love Gilbert Beilschmidt.

'I promise I will. Thank you for taking care of Feliciano,' he said. Roderich nodded, took his hand, and followed him back to the living room. There, Feliciano held Ludwig's hand and traced their signs for *I'm here* into his palm.

Ludwig held him that night, and Feliciano sang him to sleep, and it felt like being reborn.

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*Berlin, 1987*

Music still ran through Berlin, as much as gunpowder ever did, and Ludwig stood in the heart-rush of it and breathed. This was the place where he was first taught who he was. This was the place he'd fallen in love with Feliciano Vargas.

*I don't like the crowds*, Feliciano signed beside him as they wove through the crush of people to their room. Ludwig couldn't hear himself speak, so he signed back. *I'm here, it's just a little further*.

Their room was far from the Wall, and they relaxed into the scratchy furniture with groans.

'If I'd known it would be this bad, I would have just bought Bowie's vinyl,' Feliciano complained, and Ludwig laughed tiredly and leaned over to kiss his hair. He was better suited to life in the countryside, where war and America didn't hang as heavy as art did.



'Do you like it?' he asked. 'Being back in Berlin?'

Feliciano pressed his lips together. 'I love this city, but it always holds too much history.'

That was how Ludwig felt, too. Berlin was full of old blood.

And so they made themselves anew, avant-garde like the glitter in the streets, in clothes that showed them as lovers rather than soldiers. Feliciano pulled him down to kiss, and Ludwig kissed him back with everything he had, leaving blushing marks on his neck.

'I love you, Ludwig,' he whispered, eyes liquid-heated and dark gold. Ludwig's breath hitched in his throat.

'I love you too.'

'Can I-' Feliciano swallowed, the bulb of his throat bobbing, and Ludwig's eyes were drawn to it, to him, all of him. Their little room felt warm.

'What do you need, liebbling?' he dared to ask. Berlin and Feliciano had a way of making him feel *wild*, the gunpowder lighting up again in his bones.

Feliciano showed it to him in signs, slow and deliberate, and heat rushed to Ludwig's head.

'Feliciano,' he breathed.

'Please,' he said, voice wavering. 'I want this, let me do this for you, *please*, Ludwig.'

Ludwig kissed him, chest tight and nearly painful with how much he wanted this, wanted him, and Feliciano sank down in front of him and whispered *thank you, thank you*; hands on Ludwig's hips to pull him closer. He looked so good like that Ludwig felt like he would fall apart. He slipped his hands into his soft hair and held him as carefully and precious as all of this was, let him take it with his eyes so dilated that the gold was only a shimmering ring around the black, ruining him, mouth and hair and voice in the prettiest, most perfect way.

'Oh, liebbling,' he whispered, and Feliciano blinked and swallowed and pressed himself a little further down. The words tumbled from him like warm rain, *you're doing so well, you're so good*. Feliciano whined and his hands painted the words instead, *feels so good, thank you*. He took it in a way that was more beautiful than any art.

After, Ludwig helped him paint himself back together, oil paints in copper and blue and pink, the colours of their skies back home, in swirls and stars across his skin. Feliciano asks him to do his mouth, and Ludwig paints pink over them with the touch Gilbert taught him for touching downed birds.

'It doesn't hurt,' Feliciano assured him. His voice was still a little raspy, and he giggled when Ludwig blushed. 'You're very gentle.'

Ludwig concentrated on the oil paint instead of on the swell of Feliciano's lower lip. As he worked, a delicate fingertip traced over his brow in blue. Not Prussian blue, but sky blue, bright and daring and lovely.

'You're beautiful,' Feliciano whispered, and began to outline his features in gold paint. It felt strange and wonderful on his skin, like armour against this city full of sharp edges. Feliciano looked like art itself, glittering more than an entire city before him.

'You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,' he told him, and they walked out into the city fearlessly alive.

By the stage, they wove through the crowd. Feliciano shone, an artist and an angel dancing through humanity. Ludwig paused to look up at the looming Wall, taller now, wider, splitting the city apart. Somewhere beyond there was Gilbert.

He shook it away and heard someone up ahead reciting a poem, leaning into someone else's chest.

*'Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art-'*

'I know that poem,' Feliciano said. Ludwig could see his smile from where he stood. 'I know a line of poetry too. By Oscar Wilde.'

Ludwig abruptly realized what poetry was about to say, and started pushing forward as Feliciano began the quote, *'Love is a sacrament that should be taken-'*

'Feliciano, do *not* tell them the Oscar Wilde quote,' he demanded, hoping the blue and gold paint would hide the hot blush he could feel spreading on his face.

And then he stopped as he saw the man Feliciano was speaking to, blue eyes and bomber jacket, green eyes and a slight, knowing, happier smile. Feliciano's hand slipped into his and his thumb made the words *I'm here, I know*.

'Hello, Ludwig,' Arthur said.

Ludwig nodded. It was strange, almost too much in the best way, to see them again. 'Hello, Arthur.'

Feliciano laughed beside him in the way he knew meant he thought Ludwig was being awkward and endearing and wonderful, and he smiled down at him. Did they see it, the pilot and the soldier turned lovers, the way he loved Feliciano proudly? Did they see- his face heated again- the bruised swell of his mouth...?

'Did you come for Bowie?' Feliciano interrupted his thoughts.

'I didn't expect to see you again,' Ludwig admitted, but he was glad of it. He was glad they still loved as he and Feliciano did, in the cold world.

'I'm glad to see you. You look...good,' Alfred said. Their eyes met. They'd both healed since that sunny bedroom after the prison.

'I am. I'm happy,' Ludwig said, and he meant it, every word. Even in Gilbert's city, he was happy.

'We are too.' Arthur smiled at his pilot.

'You look it.' Feliciano signed at him to go get something to drink, but as Ludwig walked away he heard him speak again.

'You didn't hear the rest of the quote, did you? No?'

Ludwig walked faster after that. He didn't want to think about the rest of the quote right now, not when he could still remember Feliciano whispering *thank you*. Domine non sum dignus indeed.

When he returned, Alfred looked confused and Arthur wouldn't look at him. Ludwig sighed, affection and exasperation warm in his chest, and sat down on the grass with Feliciano. His beer was cold in his hand, but he could barely feel it. All he knew was the sudden, glorious swell of music, and the joy that spread across his face.

'Oh,' he said, as Bowie sang, 'It's beautiful.'

'It is,' Ludwig breathed. 'The most beautiful thing.'

Feliciano turned to him and his fingers slipped into Ludwig's hair, and then they were kissing, salt and heat and love in the press of their mouths.

Ludwig loved him so much. He loved that he could give him this future of music and art, he loved that other people could see his love. He loved Feliciano in ways he never knew he could.

'Ich liebe dich,' Feliciano promised him. Ludwig kissed the words from his mouth.

'Ti amo, lieblich.'

## Chapter End Notes

:: Carved wood memories belonging to the person you used to be

# Epilogue

## Chapter Summary

In which everything heals.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Somewhere in Italy, 1987*

The ring was the exact shade of summertime and sunset, the colour of Feliciano's eyes. Ludwig rubbed his thumb along the burnished edge, absorbed in a moment in his baker's callouses, no longer in the same place as they had been when he was a soldier and nothing else.

It was August, summertime, and many, many years ago, a soldier had met an artist who shone like the sun in a train heading West, away from everything he used to be. Ludwig pressed a kiss to the ring and slipped it back into his pocket to pick up the wine and join Feliciano on their porch. He had built it himself a few years back, and his favourite seat creaked softly as he sat down next to Feliciano. The sun was pouring in like gold and honey and amber, lighting Feliciano's face and the smile lines around his golden eyes. Ludwig reached for his hand and pressed it to his lips, his heart thrumming and bright in his chest.

'Liebling,' he murmured.

'Ti amo,' Feliciano responded, and traced it again on his palm. They drank as the sun painted them both.

This was his favourite place and time in the world, Italy when the sun was setting just outside their home. Home- that was a thing that had haunted him for years when he had wandered through Berlin. Home had been something he didn't truly have, hadn't thought he'd deserved, but he had it now and it was *beautiful*. Home was Feliciano's laugh and their two dogs and the paintings on the walls and cake on the weekends. Home was a gentle thing away from war, something he deserved, something he loved- oh, God, he loved all of this. Ludwig was home, and he was in love, and he was so happy.

'Do you remember the day we met?' Ludwig asked. His voice had dropped to a hoarse rasp, and his eyes were drawn to the blushing pink kiss mark on Feliciano's collarbone. He was wearing one of his old shirts today, with the neckerchief loose.

'Every day,' Feliciano said. He kissed Ludwig's knuckles. 'You were the most beautiful person I had ever seen.'

'You saved me,' Ludwig said. Tears hitched in the back of his throat, and he let them fall. He knew how to cry now, he knew how to be gentle, he knew how to love. He knew who he was. Feliciano reached for him with a quiet noise, and Ludwig gathered him up. 'You pulled me from the grey and showed me the world when I thought everything was lost. You have given me so much. I want to give you the world, lieblich, Feliciano. You are-' He swallowed, struggling through the weight of golden emotion. Feliciano was backlit by the sunset, and he looked like an angel. 'You are my everything, my Feliciano. I wish I could give you what you deserve. I wish I could ask you this, and we would be sworn together in every heaven you've ever heard of. I can't now, but one day I will. I promise.'

'Ludwig?' Feliciano asked softly. His eyes were glimmering like liquid gold. Ludwig leaned up to kiss him, softly, slowly, and he felt like a bird with a talonful of cornflowers.

'Feliciano Vargas,' he said, and held out the ring, 'will you marry me?'

Feliciano kissed him with a sob, and Ludwig felt his hands, artists' hands, gentle hands, tracing *yes* and *I love you* and *always* all over his skin. Ludwig kissed him, floating, half-laughing into the tears, and slipped the ring onto his finger. He was glowing, glowing like the sun, with the man he loved more than anything.

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*October 1989*

The name *Beilschmidt* slipped from him slowly, painlessly, until the echoes of it in his old papers and his memory were all that remained. They could not be married in a church, but Ludwig didn't care. He was Ludwig Vargas to everyone who mattered, and nobody would ever know any different.

Beilschmidt was Gilbert's name. Vargas was his own. The golden ring proved it, as did Feliciano's love. And perhaps, slowly, as the year that would change everything dawned, some of the people in their little town began to realize that.

Ludwig wasn't scared of that anymore. It took a while, but one day in October they walked down the street and Feliciano told him to wait and dashed into a shop, only to come out with a squirming golden puppy and an exclamation of *happy birthday!* and how he had wanted to wait until tomorrow but they were leaving tomorrow and he wanted Ludwig to see the puppy now, and Ludwig kissed him right there in the middle of the street.

Feliciano smiled when he broke away, amazed and wonderful, with the puppy still squirming in Ludwig's arms. For a second, he remembered the laws and the prison and the trial, heart beating like a trapped bird, but Feliciano took his hand, golden eyes bright and steady, traced *I'm here* on his palm, and called out a hello to their neighbor, who was older than Ludwig could understand and always bought apple cakes at his bakery.

Ludwig still couldn't understand all of her accent, especially when she talked this fast, but she was smiling and gesturing and the puppy was licking his cheek, and Feliciano was smiling like the sun.

'Feliciano?' he asked after she'd hobbled away, and he just laughed and kissed him on the cheek.

'She said she had suspected ever since I showed her my paintings of you, but that you seem like a very nice boy and that-' He giggled. 'That things are changing, and that things will be okay.'

'They will,' Ludwig agreed. In the late October sun, the day before he turned forty-eight, suddenly the world seemed brighter and lighter and wonderful.

He named the puppy *Aster* for her golden fur and for the way the stars shone bright that night through the window of their bedroom, and for the spiraling constellations. The world was changing for the better.

The next morning, they went to Berlin.

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*November, 1989*

The city had changed since they'd been here. They slipped between the glitter and the gunpowder like they were meant to be here, hand in hand, listening to the growl of the streets.

A couple weeks in Berlin, just for his birthday. Ludwig felt Berlin fill him like a bass note, rumbling through his bones, but it wasn't his city anymore. He was here because this city had made him, but he was not here to stay. His heart belonged to a sunny Italian countryside and Feliciano now.

They stretched out in the little flat they'd rented, their dogs bounding out into the backyard, and Ludwig closed his eyes and listened to the restless hum of the streets.

'Things are changing,' he said. Feliciano nodded and signed back to him, as he usually did when it got too loud.

*Everything feels different.*

Ludwig thought of Gilbert less and less as the years went by, but he hung pale and bright here. Maybe it was the fervent hum in the streets that had drawn them back, their artists' hearts in tune with the building storm, or maybe Gilbert still held a red-string line from Ludwig's heart.

Ludwig took Feliciano's hand, and caught his bright golden gaze and the mischievous tilt of his mouth.

'Do you remember the last time we were here?' Feliciano asked, and his hands moved in the same slow, heated patterns. Ludwig swallowed and saw Feliciano's eyes crinkle as they always did when he blushed.

'I bet you I remember it better than you do,' he rasped. Feliciano rose and led him towards their room.

'Are you sure?' he asked, and Ludwig had to concede, because all he remembered after that was gold heat and slickness and muffled wonderful noises.

The days after that, they wandered the bars and art galleries they'd used to frequent, so long ago when they were only a soldier and an artist and not lovers too. All the while, the city whispered and buzzed and *sang*, like an eagle about to hatch. The East was a tinderbox of anger and power and Berlin was going to burn.

It was in an artists' bar that they heard it, one November night when it wasn't quite dark yet, drinking with their heads leaning together. The jukebox in the corner crackled their song, but someone else had turned on the TV, and Ludwig was holding Feliciano's hand when the man said the words.

He stuttered, he glanced at his notes, and it was like the whole bar fell into a quiet, holy silence as he said the words about border crossings.

*'...immediately, without delay.'*

Those words were the lightning that set Berlin alight, and Ludwig felt the thunder begin to roar within him in the single, silent breath after the words, before everything broke open.

*The Berlin Wall is falling*, he thought, and he remembered the soldier he used to be wondering aloud to a beautiful artist about exactly this, and he thought of how wonderful and terrible and beautiful the world was that he was sitting here with Feliciano as everything changed for better.

Next, he thought: *Gilbert*.

They ran to the Wall, feet pounding on the singing streets, hearts beating like birds released from concrete cages. They got there as the people started to climb the Wall, as people started to tear at the concrete with nothing but bare hands and nearly three decades of *wanting*.

Feliciano held onto his hand. They understood each other. Ludwig understood Gilbert Beilschmidt like nobody else. He knew, somewhere deeper than his bones, from the place where Berlin still called to him, that Gilbert was alive and that he was here.

'Gilbert,' Ludwig said, the word burning on his tongue after so many years without it, and Feliciano understood.

The Wall's power came from fear, not from the concrete, and fear had shattered like broken bones in a steel prison. Ludwig climbed, breathless and bleeding from his palms. His heart hurt in his chest and he felt alive in a desperate, aching way.

The shadow fell across him as he reached the top of the concrete that scarred the city, and a hand- a scarred, crooked, pale hand- took his. His blood stained them both. Ludwig knew

him. Ludwig would know him anywhere, the man who pulled him to his feet atop the Berlin Wall.

'Gilbert,' Ludwig whispered. Gilbert cocked his head. He was older and scarred and weary, the ashes of the man who haunted Ludwig, but his smile was the same.

'Ludwig,' he said, breaking them both down to the pieces, stripping away all the years until they stood atop the Berlin Wall with nothing but the past between them.

Ludwig had wished Gilbert was dead for years. He had dreamed of it, prayed for it during the worst nights, the nights where all he could think of was the harsh steel of the prison and the harsher words of his big brother who had said he was only doing the best for him. Standing on the top of the Berlin Wall as the world changed, Ludwig knew only that both of them were done with calling him *baby brother*.

'You're looking good,' Gilbert said softly. His thumb traced the golden ring, and then he *let go* of him, turned away into the glare of the streetlights and the stars and the roaring people, threw out his arms, and *screamed*- a terrible, painful, victorious cry like a wounded eagle and a healing city. Gilbert Beilschmidt, the invincible, the invulnerable, the angel of Berlin.

Ludwig saw the moment when he fell. It was like lightning in his copper-red eyes, the most human vulnerability Ludwig had ever seen, his wild expression crumpling into something heartbreakingly intimate. He turned to where Gilbert stared and saw a man standing in the midst of the West, a still point in the storm.

To anyone else it would have looked like Gilbert Beilschmidt fell, but Ludwig knew better. He saw him reach out, the movement as graceful as if he'd suddenly become a bird, and he saw the way he fell, as gently as holy light. He saw Gilbert push himself up, blood smearing his face, and run to Roderich. He saw his brother twirl his musician up in the air until his leg gave out and they both collapsed, and he saw them kiss in the shadow of the Berlin Wall falling, kiss like the world was starting again and like love was the only things they knew.

Ludwig bent and took Feliciano's hand, and held onto him as he climbed up on the Wall. Things were changing, but all for the better, This was a world he was proud to live and love in. He kissed the golden ring on Feliciano's finger, and kissed the tears from his cheeks, and knew wonderfully and forever that he loved him. Whatever happened, they had each other.

'Ich liebe dich,' Feliciano said. His eyes were glimmering with tears as Ludwig kissed him like a promise. Somewhere, in the love and art and war of Berlin, someone was playing their song. They would make it. They were free. Ludwig promised that to Feliciano in his kiss.

'Ti amo,' he whispered, and the world was bright.

Things would be okay. Things would be beautiful, because things were always beautiful, even in war, even in darkness. There was always, always love in Ludwig's life now. Things were beautiful.

*As long as I have you!*



-FIN-

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading. This has been an amazing experience to write. The Aleatory-verse has been something very dear to me for years and I'm happy to finally see it fulfilled.

:: The beauty of healing in all its forms

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!